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THE OLD NORSE SAGAS

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By Halvdan Koht

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TO THE MEMORY
OF
THE INSPIRING SCHOLAR
GUDBRAND VIGFUSSON

PREFACE

This book is based on lectures delivered at the Lowell Institute, Boston, during the fall of 1930, and I am very grateful to the Lowell Institute for offering me the opportunity of speaking to an American audience on a subject so close to the heart of every man of Norse race as are the old Norse sagas written down by the Icelanders.

The chapters of the book will still bear the marks of being originally given as lectures. They have, however, been thoroughly revised for publication; one chapter was even completely rewritten.

My friend, Professor F. Stanton Cawley, of Harvard University, took the pains to correct errors in grammar and style, due to the author's imperfect mastery of the English language, and I want to express my thanks to him for his excellent service. To be sure, it was not possible for him to remove a certain foreign flavor, in most cases inevitable in the writings of a foreigner; I hope the reader will not object too much to it.

I have added a bibliography that might be useful to American and English readers, particularly the list of sagas translated into English.

H. K.

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THE ART OF THE SAGAS

VERY few literary works left to us from the Middle Ages make an immediate appeal to modern readers. Medieval art, particularly architecture, we may enjoy without feeling any need of transforming our esthetic sense; medieval sculpture and stained glass have a direct artistic message to us, which demands no kind of explanation or translation. But in the case of literature we generally feel the necessity of study and effort in order to come into true contact with it.

To be sure, the language, more or less foreign, creates a practical difficulty; but even when that is overcome, the whole medieval style and taste in literature, the spirit that governs it, remain foreign to most of us. As a matter of fact, very few works of medieval literature have been able to preserve a general interest; the great mass of them are objects of study, not of enjoyment, and they are generally confined to a strictly limited circle of readers.

Hence it cannot but be a surprising phenomenon that the whole Icelandic production of sagas, dating from the thirteenth century, is still a living literature. Not one or two or three single sagas may be pointed out as particularly excellent works of art and objects of a broad interest; but a whole library of sagas—thirty, forty, or fifty—remain today popular reading, in Iceland in the original language,

in Norway, and to a lesser degree in Denmark and Sweden, in translations. Many of them have been translated into German, and a considerable number into English, appearing in popular editions.

What lies behind this unique and vital power of the sagas?

Undoubtedly it is the art, the literary craftsmanship which formed them, so simple and yet so finished, holding irresistibly the reader's attention and interest. When we begin reading a saga, it interests us immediately, it appears to us quite natural and plain. To be natural is indeed a great art, especially in literature. It requires arduous and conscious effort to find the natural, straightforward mode of expression in writing, and what, in this respect, Boccaccio achieved in Italy in the fourteenth century, had already been attained by the Icelandic saga authors from the close of the twelfth century on.

The art of the saga was the art of telling. The saga is a story. The word itself means "tale," that which is told. The saga-men, as they were called, had no other interest than that of telling a tale. Their task was to capture the interest of their audience. They had to study all the tricks of art that were indispensable to achieve this end, but as they told their stories their purpose was to conceal every kind of artifice; and they succeeded. When you hear or read a saga, you have no thought of art, you are wholly fascinated by the tale itself. The direct and pregnant language calls up before your eyes living images of situations and characters.

At no moment does the author put himself forward; he makes the events tell their own story and

the characters present themselves by their own actions. He gives no rationalization of his own, in any case not directly. He may have a meaning in view, he may want to give a moral or an explanation; but he does not venture to express it as his own. He transforms it into narrative form, he presents it in an objective way that enforces it upon you with the truth of a fact. For the very reason that his personality remains external to his story, its power becomes irresistible, he makes you believe it. This is not only the effect of straightforward, vivid narration; it depends still more on the skill with which he constructs his story and pictures his characters.

The sagas are not all alike; they may be very different in their aims and their forms. They may endeavor to reproduce historic realities, they may present pure fiction, or they may hold a middle course between those two extremes. But every saga contains a series of events, of shorter episodes, and these do not constitute a saga without being linked together into some kind of unity. There is the real test of the saga-man, whether or not he is able to combine all the single episodes, even of a long story, into an interesting whole; and indeed we have scores of sagas that really form such unified narratives.

I shall give you some examples to illustrate how the saga-tellers construct their stories in order to maintain the interest of their auditors, to keep them in suspense. I shall take one example from a romantic saga, another from an historical saga, and you will see that the means are different, but the effect obtained is much the same. It is always the task of the narrator to make every particular episode or scene of his story as vivid and interesting as possible;

but, especially in the romantic saga, he has also to arouse the curiosity of the listener to know the issue of events, to make him eager to hear the end of the story.

This is the task of every novelist at any time, and many generations of authors of fiction have exerted their fancy in constructing ingenious plots that were intended to make their readers eager for the solution. You will observe that the Icelandic saga-tellers did not make use of plots in the modern sense of the word, and they did not surprise their audience by an unexpected solution. On the contrary, they prepared it for what would come, indeed this preparation was no small part of their art. In this way, and in other ways too, the art of the saga is much more that of a drama than that of a novel; it is dominated by a destiny that leads events and characters to their fatal consequences.

As an example of the construction of a romantic saga, I take the Saga of Gísli the Outlaw.* It is one of the shorter sagas, and from beginning to end the story is concentrated about a single hero. Hence it is more simple than many other sagas, but it is typical as a whole and in the details of its composition.

The Saga of Gísli begins with a short introduction, telling how an enchanted sword came into the possession of his family, acquired by wrongful means and laden with future misfortune. I rather think that this introduction is a later addition to the saga, not belonging to the original form; it is a conventional feature which does not play any particular part in the development of the story, but it prepares

* It has been translated into English by George W. Dasent, Edinburgh, 1866.

the listener for a tragedy, and the medieval public seems to have been more interested in tragic stories than in those with happy endings.

Then the character of Gisli is delineated by the recital of the exploits of his youth. He finds himself obliged to commit a whole series of homicides in order to avenge the honor of his family. The consequence is that he and his immediate relatives have to emigrate from Norway to Iceland, and here the events of his real saga take place, but we already know enough about him to expect some fatal conclusion.

At first everything seems to go well. Gisli marries, as do his brother and sister, and since the two brothers and their brothers-in-law hold steadfastly together, they gain a position of power in their district. But suddenly a prophecy of misfortune casts a shadow over their happy life, and here we meet a typical trait of the Icelandic saga, the use of prophecy in order to give a hint of the catastrophe. Of course, the prophecy must not be explicit enough to anticipate the coming events; its purpose is only to give the listeners a foreboding of some important change and of a new turn of events.

In the Saga of Gisli, the power and pride of his family provoke one of the characters to ask: "How long will this arrogance last?" We feel the spirit of nemesis behind this question, and promptly the answer is given by a wise old man: "Three years hence they will not all be so like-minded as now."

Now it is a remarkable bit of art that the prophecy so announced is not allowed to stand as a mere foretelling of future dissension. It becomes itself an element of action. On hearing about it, Gisli proposes

to counteract its effect by establishing a perpetual sworn brotherhood among the brothers-in-law, and they all seem to accept his proposal. But at the moment the oath is to be taken, one of the brothers-in-law, married to the sister of Gisli, refuses to enter into brotherhood with the one whom he is not directly connected with, the brother of Gisli's wife. We do not see the reason at once; but later we learn that there is jealousy behind the refusal, the wives of the men not having married just the husbands they wanted. From the first moment Gisli understands that the seed of disagreement has been sown, and he cannot but say: "It is fate that rules."

So we wait in suspense for the passing of the three years. In the meantime nothing can happen, because all the brothers-in-law go abroad separately, seeking wealth by trade in foreign countries. It is a conventional link of action in Icelandic sagas to send the heroes abroad, and generally we are told about their exploits and the honor they have won in foreign lands. In this case, the hero and the other actors of the drama are sent away merely in order that the (likewise conventional) three years may pass.

After returning, Gisli invites to his farm a great gathering to celebrate the winter feast. Early on the day when the guests are to come, his wife remarks: "Now only one thing seems wanting—the presence of my brother." But Gisli answers: "I think quite otherwise, I should give much not to see him here." We understand that he fears some calamity resulting from the presence of his brother-in-law, and we are alarmed at the arrival of a message that this man has also returned from abroad; he is expected at the farm the same night. Gisli immediately dis-

patches men to meet him and keep him away from the feast.

Here, when we see, or rather feel, the catastrophe approaching, the saga excites our expectation by a detailed account of the attempt of Gisli to avert it. We must accompany on their way his two emissaries who are charged with his message to the brother-in-law. They have to cross the fjord in a boat; on the other side they get the two swiftest horses in the neighborhood, and ride on as quickly as possible. But meanwhile the brother-in-law has ridden away by another route, and when the two men arrive they fail to find him there. They turn their horses and follow his track; finally, they see him in the distance and spur their horses, but the horses break down. Then they run as fast as their feet can carry them, shouting, and now they are observed by the man they seek. He waits and hears their message, but he answers: "Now it is too late, all the rivers flow to the farm of my brother-in-law, and I shall ride that way." He does so, and Gisli has to repeat: "Fate has decided." Three nights later, the brother-in-law is murdered in his bed; it is unnecessary to add that the crime is committed with the enchanted sword, which, however, by this time has been reforged into a spear.

Gisli was charged with the duty of avenging the murder, and he did it at the next winter feast. With the same spear, in the same way, he slew his other brother-in-law, the husband of his sister, whom he knew to be the murderer of his wife's brother. His guilt in the new crime was brought to light by an obscure verse which he recited on a certain occasion, and which his sister succeeded in interpreting. As

a consequence, Gísli was outlawed, and the rest of the saga, indeed almost half of the whole story, relates the desperate attempts of Gísli to defend his life against his persecutors. At the end of nine years he succumbs, and is killed.

This long fight has its own elements of suspense, and here the art of the saga-teller consists in varying the single scenes and making each one of them a little drama. It is the first half of the saga, the preparation for the final struggle, that offers the test of his skill in construction, and I think this is a fairly typical example of the means by which, in a romantic saga, the interest of the listener in the whole story is roused and maintained.

I want to fix your attention at once on a certain peculiarity in the course of events in this saga. You have noticed that the catastrophe of the drama begins with a succession of two secret murders, and you might have thought that here the saga-composer had had, and missed, a magnificent opportunity of building up a thrilling detective story. But the author has consciously neglected this opportunity. He has no interest in deluding his audience by concealing the truth or even using tricks to lead its curiosity astray. Though the identity of the culprit is concealed from the actors of the drama, the author initiates his listeners into the truth, in order that their interest may be concentrated upon the problem of what effect the unsolved crime has on the characters of his story.

Besides, in this special case, there is another observation to make. A secret murder is an ignominious crime, and obviously the hero of a saga cannot make himself guilty of an offense of that kind. But, ac-

According to old Icelandic law and conception, the murder loses its ignominy if the perpetrator leaves his weapon in the wound of the slain man, so that the avenger may see with whom he has to deal. In the Saga of Gisli, on the occasion of both murders, this precept is observed; but in both cases only a single man has seen the fatal spear and knows the perpetrator; to all others he is unknown. The problem then is how he who knows, and who keeps the secret, will set out to achieve his revenge, and the attention of the listeners is held, not by the vulgar motive of ferreting out the criminal, but by the loftier interest of pursuing the consequences of the secret in the psychology and the action of the hero. I presume you will agree that the latter method of producing suspense is the nobler one. ✓

Now it is the general rule of the sagas, even if the consideration of honor does not enter in as in the case of secret murder, that they do not stoop to become detective stories. In several sagas ignominious crimes are committed; for instance, common theft. It may be that the motive of the theft is not mere greed, but jealousy or enmity. In no case, however, is the audience left in doubt about who is the guilty person. Whether it be expressly said or not, we are able to suspect it, at least if we possess some psychological imagination. The rôle of such crimes in the sagas is always to excite our expectation of their consequences in the relations of the characters and in the course of events. The interest of a saga never centers in a secret that is to be discovered; the secret is no more than a link in the development of the story, and, what is important, it is never, or very rarely, a secret to the audience.

Passing from the romantic saga to the historical saga, the art of construction necessarily changes, and I cannot represent to you a whole saga as an example of general rules of art in writing history. Obviously, the more purely historical a saga wishes to be, the less it can endeavor to obtain that unity of action which is the ideal of a novel. If the historical saga deals with a single man, and very often it does, it must try to maintain a unity of character; but in most cases it would lose its quality of history if it attempted to represent the succession of events as a closely knit nexus of cause and effect, as in a drama. There is, however, an art of history, and though you cannot make a long period of history a single piece of art without falsifying its character in some way or other, you may be able to compose an episode of history so as to excite an interest like that of a drama or a novel.

In the Norse historical sagas you will find many episodes which obtain such an effect, but it has to be admitted that, in general, this effect is produced by the introduction of romantic elements and hence by moving away from pure history. The study of such episodes, then, cannot teach us more about the art of the saga than the study of essentially romantic works. Instead of that, I wish to show you the artful construction of a bit of a saga where all romantic elements are conscientiously dispensed with, and in this way you will be able to see how the saga-teller did his work.

I choose a section of the Saga of King Sverri, the part which tells of his final struggle against his rival, King Magnus, which took place in the years 1183

and 1184.* I feel justified in singling out this section of the saga, as I am convinced that, in fact, it was originally composed as a small independent story intended to be told by itself.

The preceding sections of the saga have related the beginnings of the reign of King Sverri, how he came to Norway as a poor and solitary man with nothing to enforce his pretensions except his own assertion that he was of royal birth, and how, in an almost miraculous way, he succeeded in forming an army and gaining a dominion in a hard struggle with the duly crowned and popular King Magnus. The situation at the opening of the story, which I shall now sketch, is that Sverri is master of the northern part of the country, residing at Nidaros, while Magnus governs the rest of the country, with his royal capital in the west, at Bergen.

The story begins in a seemingly artless fashion by telling how Sverri prepares an attack on Magnus. But suddenly his character is revealed to us by his speeches to his men. Repeatedly he announces to them that he does not dare to enter upon an armed contest with his rival and that he plans to leave the country for Sweden. By such speeches he seeks to make Magnus feel secure, but their chief aim is to incite his own men to fight, giving them the impression that they themselves are impelling the King to take the offensive. The natural outcome is the surprise attack on Bergen, which is taken by Sverri, while Magnus escapes to Denmark.

The account of this fight is only the introduction

* The Saga of King Sverri has been translated into English by J. Sephton, London, 1899.

to the story of the decisive battle. Apparently Sverri is now master of the country, and he returns to Nidaros, his capital, in triumph. But there are signs of weakness; a short chapter tells how his officers are slain by the inhabitants of a district in western Norway, Sogn. Sverri arms for revenge, and the next summer he sails with his fleet to Sogn; pushing deep into the fjords, he inflicts a terrible chastisement on the rebellious people. But here the saga abruptly leaves him and turns to an account of the activities of King Magnus. We learn how he prepares for war in Denmark, how he comes with a fleet to Norway, and how he steers northward along the coast, everywhere strengthening his forces, until, at last, he sails into the Sognefjord.

At this moment the reader (or the listener) suddenly becomes aware that he is caught by an unexpected excitement. Through the parallel report of the actions of the rival kings, who know nothing about each other, the author has quietly led us to a point where, in a flash, we perceive the catastrophe approaching. Meanwhile the saga continues by parallel chapters, passing from the one king to the other, thus still maintaining, or rather increasing, our excitement.

We hear that Sverri is surprised by discovering a great fleet steering against him; he quickly understands who is coming, and that a battle is inevitable, no escape being open. He explains the situation to his men, and indeed it seems desperate, for his fleet consists of no more than twelve ships, while Magnus brings twenty-six. But all prepare for battle.

In such a tense situation, it makes a strange impression to come upon the trivial remark that when

Syerri addresses his men, standing on a rock by the sea, he happens to lay his hands upon the prow of his ship, but his men take his hands off, because the tar is not dry. This remark has generally been conceived as testimony to the accurate recollection preserved about all the circumstances of the battle. Personally, I regard it as a touch of the author's literary skill. Thoroughly contrasting with the advancing movement of the story, the little picture of Syerri with his tarry fingers gives a short moment of respite to the excited reader, and also, by showing the respect of the soldiers for their chief and king, gives us a hint of their certainty of victory.

At the same time, Magnus is approaching near to his enemy. He too addresses his army, and so does one of his captains. The two speeches recapitulate the whole opposition between the rival kings and their parties, from a social and from a political point of view. The author here has seized an opportunity to state the reasons for the rivalry between the protagonists; it comes as a natural link in the drama, and it enhances our excitement. We catch the importance of the decision—two opposing principles in conflict.

Finally the battle opens, and at first it goes against King Syerri, but when the outlook is darkest, the author observes: "Now it may seem unlikely to the listener, what here shall be told about the issue of the battle; but I shall report what, besides fortune, had the greatest effect in turning the victory an unexpected way." Then he goes on to tell how the superior forces of Magnus were overcome, and the greater part of his army, including himself, lost their lives. The episode concludes with the thanks of

Sverri to God and his men and with his triumphant address to the conquered enemy, summing up the whole story of his fight for the kingdom. In this way the author rounds off his subject; his audience draws breath again, satisfied by the result.

In reviewing this story, we notice that the author has obtained his effect essentially by his method of construction. He has had recourse to no kind of romantic means, no prophecies, no dreams; he has kept to rational facts. The only thing that we can say he has taken from his own imagination is the series of speeches he puts in the mouths of his heroes. They serve both as breathing spells in the progress of events and as a means of bringing the dramatic opposition of characters into stronger relief. Everything has an apparent stamp of objectivity; but this air of non-partisanship only emphasizes the passionate movement of the story.

So we see that even in pure history the art of saga construction asserts itself, and what is true of the saga as a whole is still more true of the particular episodes of which every saga consists. We must recall how the saga-men presented their stories; they told them before a household audience during the long winter nights. It was often their task, as compensation for the hospitality they enjoyed, to fill a certain number of nights with the telling of a saga, and they had to arrange their story so as to make the audience desirous of gathering to hear the sequel. It was still more important, however, to keep alive the interest of the audience in the events told on each single night. It might happen that some of the listeners would fall asleep, and that would be a great

disgrace for the story-teller; it might injure his professional prestige. Therefore he must strive to make every single episode a sort of drama by itself, and in consequence the sagas abound in such dramatic scenes.

Many of these particular episodes are accounts of fights. People have always been interested in hearing about battles and fighting, not least in the old days when every man had to be prepared to defend himself by force. In recent times, the newspaper reports of contests in sport seem to have caught popular interest to a still higher degree, and just as the cleverness of the sport reporters is tested by their ability to make every event look novel, so the Icelandic saga-tellers had to prove themselves capable of varying their fighting scenes. We must indeed admit that, although the hero invariably has to distinguish himself by almost superhuman deeds of might, the sagamen always succeed in introducing new elements of prowess. But they have at their command many other kinds of episodes—oral disputes, conducting of lawsuits, playing of games, etc. One often finds repeated conventional motives and stereotyped phrases; there is a common style dominating all the sagas. Still oftener, however, one must admire the imagination of the authors in using common material in a new way.

To a great extent, the novelty of each separate episode depends on its particular object; for almost without exception they serve the aim of picturing the character of the hero or some other person of the saga. Even scenes of fighting are made to do duty in this way.

I take as an instance the two short passages that

tell of the death of the great hero Gunnar of Lithend in the Saga of Burnt Njál.* Gunnar has been outlawed because of a homicide, and he and his brother resolve to leave Iceland. They make careful preparation for their departure; but at the moment they ride away, the horse of Gunnar stumbles and throws him off, so that he happens to look back at his farm. Then the saga makes him utter the famous words: "Fair is the hillside, it never appeared to me as fair as today, yellow the fields, mown the meadows; I shall ride home and seek no other land." His brother warns him that to stay means certain death; but Gunnar stays at home, abiding his destiny. The same fall, his enemies gather and beset him in his house, where he is alone with mother and wife. For a long time he defends himself with his bow, but at last his bow-string is cut. Turning to his wife, he asks her for two locks of her hair with which to make a new bow-string. "Is that worth much to you?" she asks. "My life depends on it," he answers; "so long as I have my bow I can hold my enemies off." "Then," she says, "I shall remember that once you gave me a box on the ear, and I care not whether you defend yourself a longer or shorter time." "Everybody wins fame in his own way," Gunnar retorts, and he fights until he can fight no more.

It is easy to see how the replies picture the two characters here opposed, and that is another aspect of the art of the sagas, to make events and sayings characterize persons. Quite generally, we shall have to observe that the saga is not only interested in telling the story for the sake of the exciting events;

* Translated by George W. Dasent, Edinburgh, 1861, and two later editions.

it is just as much occupied by the desire to draw full-length portraits of all persons who take part in the action. Perhaps it is most of all this dominating psychological interest that makes the sagas appear so modern to us, and we may conclude that the Icelandic public was as curious about characters as about events; it was intent on seeing human psychology reveal itself.

A modern Norwegian novelist and dramatist, Hans E. Kinck, who knew the old sagas intimately, once wrote a brilliant little essay on "characters that the saga did not understand." Very ingeniously he demonstrated how the sagas, in several instances, contain traits which require another explanation of their character than they themselves give; particularly this may hold good as to more complex natures when repressed instincts are astir. As a chief instance, he names that same wife of Gunnar whom I quoted a while ago; Kinck tries to explain the true motives of her apparent depravity in this case as disappointed love and need of self-assertion.

Yet the same author is full of admiration for the power of psychological insight in the sagas, and he contrasts them in this respect with the medieval Italian novels which stand equally high in the art of telling a story. Indeed, the Icelandic sagas present a whole gallery of individualized and interesting characters which stand out before us so clearly and palpably that we seem to know them personally. There are many different types of them, so many that it is impossible to sketch even all the most important. There is the noble hero who is too magnanimous to act like a really prudent man, such as Gunnar in the Saga of Burnt Njál. Another hero,

the poet Egil, is a man who in all situations insists upon his legal right, but at the same time is inclined to identify wealth and honor. A third saga takes as its hero a man who has no heroic qualities at all, but who impresses an admiring audience by his shrewdness, which always brings him the victory, although often by rather shabby means. But at his side we meet the wise old man who also evades dispute and fights, but who possesses kindness of heart. Then there are passionate men, loving a woman or a fight with equal ardor. There are evil-doers, slanderous women, defamatory men, intriguing schemers, traitors. There are many who conceal from the public their true qualities, whether good or bad, and there are complex characters who always excite the curiosity of the audience. Some characters may be on the verge of insanity, other people may excite our laughter by their droll devices.

The saga likes to throw light on its characters by contrasting them each with another. In many sagas, perhaps most of them, historical sagas as well as romantic ones, you will find the mental qualities of the hero illuminated by being placed beside those of another man, be it an opponent or a relative. Thus the character of Saint Olaf, King of Norway, is brought into relief by the juxtaposition of his antagonist and namesake, King Olaf of Sweden, this latter being just as conceited, disobliging, and narrow-minded as the former is large-minded, conciliatory, and unselfish. The boundless devotion of Gisli the Outlaw, his never-failing willingness to do battle in the defense of family honor and family obligations, stands out in a more brilliant light as

compared with the prudent reserve of his more prosaic brother.

This general contrast of characters is one of the artistic principles of the saga, and is connected with its dramatic tendencies. It presents a drama not only of events, but of characters as well. The conflict of wills and parties, of jealousies and enmities, which is the theme of the sagas, attains its climax in the clash of opposite characters.

Sometimes the method of characterizing by means of contrast may become somewhat schematic, almost mechanical. So in the Saga of Egil Skallagrimsson the poet.* His grandfather is pictured as an ugly and dark man, extremely tall and strong, almost a monster; but he married a handsome young woman, bright and gay. They had two sons, Thorolf and Grim. Thorolf, the older, resembled the mother, being the type of the dauntless blonde viking, while Grim, the younger, took after the father in body and mind, growing up to be just as gloomy, and more of a smith than a warrior. Thorolf had to pay with his life for his pride and magnanimity, and Grim, or Skallagrim as he was called because of his baldness, became the progenitor of the later family. He too had two sons, the older being named Thorolf after his uncle, and this second Thorolf was as like the first as it was possible to be, an athlete and a warrior, fair and gay, beloved by everybody. The younger son was the poet Egil, and he was quite the opposite, dark and ugly, a giant in strength, not at all attractive, hard to deal with. So, in both generations treated by the saga you find the parallels

* Translated by W. C. Green, London, 1893.

of contrasting characters with relatively small variations.

Such uniformity of portraiture is, however, of rare occurrence in the sagas, and even in the case just mentioned it must be admitted that the two more interesting characters, the dark ones, are plainly individualized. Then it must be kept in mind that the method of contrast is only one of the means used by the sagas to make the persons lifelike individuals. It is a link in the general system of indirect portraiture. The saga never goes very far in giving a direct characterization of its persons; in most cases it confines itself to the description of their exterior, which, of course, is of a piece with the mental habit, and then each man reveals himself by his acts and his words. In particular, the saga developed a great art of making men unveil their nature by pregnant sayings, often even by significant silence. When King Harold Fairhair, on hearing disagreeable messages, sits silent, only with a scarlet flush suffusing his face, or when, on a like occasion, one of the sons of Njál smilingly replies, "Our mother, the old woman, likes to tease us," we understand that they are dangerous men, concealing great designs.

On the whole, if it is true that the telling of events in the sagas is straightforward and direct, it is equally true that the portraying of characters is indirect, leaving the audience to draw their own conclusions. The actions and events are, in fact, nothing but the natural expressions of the characters; by comprehending the psychology of the actors you grasp the real meaning of the events. But the sagas very rarely enter into a direct explanation of happenings; they prefer to excite your imagination, so that

you are led to understand what, in the Scandinavian languages, is called a half-sung song. It is an art of intimation which gives you the satisfaction of helping to solve the riddles of events.

I give you an instance from the Saga of Egil the poet. He had sailed from Iceland with the aim of going to his old friend and master, the king of England, but, as it happened, he was wrecked on the coast of Northumberland and had to give himself into the hands of his enemy, the former king of Norway, Eirik Blood-Axe, who was reigning in that part of England. It was night when he arrived at the royal court, and, at the request of a friend of his among the King's high officers, the latter agreed to spare his life until the next morning. Egil's friend advised him then to make use of the night's respite for composing a poem in honor of the King; such a laudatory poem was always one of the surest ways of obtaining the favor of the ancient Scandinavian kings. But the same friend warned the poet that there was one person at the court who would exert all her power to frustrate every plan of rescuing his life, and that person was the Queen. Now it was a fact well known to all the listeners and readers of the saga that this Queen, Gunnhild, was a witch, and previously the saga has told us that the Queen had used her witchcraft to impel Egil to come to see her. Egil now sat down in his chamber and tried to work out his poem, but when his friend came to him at midnight to inquire what progress he was making, Egil had to admit that he had not produced a single verse. "The whole night long," he said, "a swallow has been twittering outside the window, and it has not given me a moment's rest." The saga does not

say that this swallow was sent by the Queen or perhaps was the Queen herself in disguise; it relies on your imagination, and on your superstition as well, to draw this conclusion. Egil's friend undoubtedly suspected the fact; for on going out to chase away the swallow, he saw a mysterious creature disappearing behind the house. In this indirect way you see your suspicion confirmed, and you catch the whole secret struggle between the two parties of the drama.

The aim of such reserve in the telling is to take you into the inner workshop of the saga. You get the feeling of being the fellow author of the sagaman, your imagination is called upon to complete the story. Here, perhaps, is the final secret of the art of the saga: it makes you take the place of the sagateller yourself. You get so absorbed by the story that you do not play the part of a mere passive listener, you conceive the saga as the expression of your own creative imagination.

ORIGIN OF THE SAGA

THE saga grew from many roots. Above all, it was a work of literature, of creative art, and, as such, it had its origin in artistic impulses, but many other forces concurred in producing it. It became so perfect a bit of art just because of its complex origin. Scientific endeavor, interest in historical research, contributed actively in forming it. It had its particular foundation in the social life of Iceland, but impulses came from Norway too, and here we may even point out political influences. So we have to state that many different elements gave life to the peculiar kind of literature which we call saga.

In trying to analyze the origin of the saga, we must, however, make a distinction between the written saga and the oral saga tradition. Putting history and fiction into writing is not such an extraordinary enterprise—although in the thirteenth century, and still more in the twelfth, historical literature in the vernacular was a rare occurrence in European life—but the art and the form of the saga were developed before anybody thought of making books of it. The primary source of the saga, considered in its literary particularity, is the oral tradition, and the first problem, then, is to trace the origin of this form of tradition. The problem is indeed very difficult, and we dare not say that up to this time it has been completely solved.

Generally it has been said that the saga was a result of the strong traditions inherent in the Icelandic aristocracy and brought with it from Norway. The leaders of the Norwegian emigration to Iceland were aristocratic chiefs who went out with a company of inferiors and, in the new country, founded a society still more aristocratic than that they had left in the old home. As a matter of course, the Icelandic traditions take their subjects from the history and life of the great leading families, and so the aristocratic element of the saga is obvious.

Every aristocracy loves to keep up its family traditions, and we have some clear evidences of family traditions held in high honor among the Norwegian nobility even before the emigration, but these are not much more than genealogical pedigrees, retained in memory by versification, and serving to prove the high extraction of the family. The saga is something quite different.

Looking into the contents of the family sagas of Iceland, I think it must be obvious that the very separation from Norway was powerful in forming a new set of traditions. In the new country the emigrants felt themselves a new nation; they were interested in their own origin, and this led them to make researches as to how they came to emigrate, and how they settled in the new country.

About the settling of Iceland there is a work, unique, I believe, in the whole world's literature. This is the *Landnámabók*, or the settlers' book. It is not a saga, but it is based on the sagas and on an historical survey of all Iceland, giving the names, the families, and the settling places of all the men

who came out to take land in Iceland, about four hundred in all, besides their thousands of retainers. Considering now that most of those four hundred men were members of an aristocracy relatively old, it appears very remarkable that the national tradition was able to retain information about the parentage and native place of less than a third of the number. In several cases we are in a position to prove that the pedigrees given by *Landnámabók* are absolutely fictitious, and it may happen as in the case of Skallagrim, father of the poet Egil, one of the greatest of all the settlers, that the saga cannot name the estate he came from, or even inform us about the exact place where it was situated, although the local conditions and history of the family play an important part in the story.

Manifestly, the saga tradition has forgotten many details about the Norwegian ancestors of the settlers; the emigration has caused a break in the spiritual continuity, and, as the Icelandic settlers founded a new commonwealth, so they had to begin a new history. They even developed a feeling of direct opposition to the land of their fathers, forming a general tradition or theory that the mass of emigrants had been forced to leave Norway in consequence of the tyranny of its first king.

Many of the family sagas introduce their story by telling how the founder of the family in Iceland was made to seek a new home out there, but the chief subject of the sagas is the history of the first generations in Iceland itself. It is the first century after the settling, the tenth century of our era with some few decades of the eleventh, that gives the setting for

almost all the Icelandic sagas, and in Icelandic history and literature this century is therefore properly called the Saga Era.

Of course, the saga itself was not formed in the whirlpool of events. Necessarily, the telling had to follow in the matter of time the incidents that afforded the subject, but, just as naturally, it had to begin to crystallize while the memory of the events was still living. So we may boldly assert that, as the tenth century and a little more was the age of saga events, so the following century, the eleventh, was that of tradition building. This is something more than an *a priori* conclusion. From Norway, we have some instances that attest to the forming of saga tradition towards the middle of the eleventh century. Contemporary evidence shows that at this time an intense patriotic pride was blazing up, and when, in later tradition, we come across stories expressing the same feeling in corresponding terms, though they are referred to the end of the tenth century, we are justified in dating the origin of the stories from the half-century following. In Norwegian tradition such stories center in the king, and what the king was to Norway the great families of the reigning aristocracy were to Iceland.

It is characteristic that many of the sagas themselves speak of stories being told, in large or small companies, at feasts or in public assemblies. In one of the more romantic sagas we hear about a man coming home from Norway to Iceland in the year 1008 and then appearing at the general Thing of the island. "Everybody, it is said, was very glad of that, because he was a clever man at telling stories." A more purely historical saga tells of a

newly consecrated bishop who came from abroad in the year 1135 and made his way directly to the general Thing. People were at the courts, and there was much disagreement about affairs. Then a man came with the message that the bishop was arriving. Immediately, the whole assembly hurried away and flocked around the bishop, who placed himself before the church and told all the important news from Norway.

Such accounts give an idea of the general desire of hearing news, and this desire, so human in its nature, was stimulated in solitary Iceland. We must remember that, during the long winter, the distant island in the Arctic Ocean was completely isolated from the outer world. All communication with foreign countries was restricted to the summer time, and anybody returning from his summer journey was expected to tell at length about his experiences.

In the more isolated valleys of modern Norway, I have personally seen how the curiosity for news may become a passion, dominating men. I remember when strolling along the highway in such a valley, people in the fields throwing aside their tools, running towards me as for their lives, crying aloud to bring me to a stop, and finally cross-examining me for news.

Gathering news in the like passionate way, far-off Iceland became a storehouse of tales, particularly regarding countrymen abroad and kinsmen in Norway.

But this vivid curiosity was combined in Iceland with a feeling for art that wanted the story well told. It is impossible not to notice the strong taste for literary finish that distinguishes the people of Ice-

land through their whole history, from the origins until today. Even in the first generations after the settling of Iceland we can observe poetry developing into a national profession; every second Icelander going abroad proved a poet, winning by his artful laudatory poems the favor of the kings of Norway, promptly outmatching his native Norwegian colleagues. Indeed, for a couple of centuries poetry was the only export article of Iceland.

This was not only the consequence of individual talents; there really was in Iceland a general appreciation of poetical art. This statement is borne out by a fact unique in medieval history. It happened in the 960s, before the Icelanders had succeeded in making poetry a monopoly of their own, that a Norwegian poet composed a poem in honor of the Icelandic people. Then the Icelanders decided to take up a national subscription as a reward to the author; every single farmer gave three pennies of silver, and the silver so collected, weighing fifty marks all together, was forged into an ornamental clasp which was sent to the poet. I challenge you to point out another instance of such national interest in poetry in those times.

Now, the demand for artistic form made itself felt in the telling of stories as well. Again we must think of the natural conditions of life in Iceland. The long winter nights required some kind of entertainment. At the farms there was very little work to do in winter time, and early in the evening the household assembled in the big hall around the fireplace. The farms were usually situated at long distances from each other, and visitors were not frequent. The more welcome they were when they came.

There grows up in such a society a thirst for company which makes hospitality not only a duty, but a pleasure. And at every opportunity when people gathered, they asked to hear stories. We hear about beggars passing from farm to farm, telling news and stories, in fact living on their art as tellers of tales. And beside the poets by profession, we perceive the rise of professional saga-tellers.

There is a story about a young anonymous Icelander coming to the court of King Harold Hardrádi of Norway, who reigned about the middle of the eleventh century and was highly admired by the Icelanders as a lover of poetry and as a poet himself. The newcomer asked permission to stay at the court, and, on the King's asking about his profession, he said he could tell sagas. The King then accepted him on the condition that he should be obliged to entertain everybody who asked him. The Icelander discharged his duties very well, and the courtiers liked him. But towards Christmas he grew silent and morose. The King asked him for the reason, but he would not tell. "Then," the King said, "I will guess the reason. Your stories are at an end, and that grieves you, with Christmas approaching." "That is true," the Icelander answered; "I have only one story left, and that story I dare not tell, because it deals with your own voyage to Constantinople." "But that is just the story I should like best to hear," the King retorted, "and from this day you shall be free from entertaining everybody; but Christmas Day you shall begin telling this saga and tell just a bit of it, and I will take care that it lasts all the week of the Christmas holidays." So the Icelander did, and when Christmas was over the story was

also at an end. After that the King asked how he had learned this story and was able to tell it so truthfully. The Icelander answered: "When I was at home I formed the habit of riding every year to the general Thing, and there, each year, I learned a bit of the saga from Halldor Snorrason." This was a man who had been in the company of the King at the court of the Byzantine Emperor.

The story teaches us much about the origin of the art of saga-telling. We see the transforming of news into a saga, and we see that the saga is primarily entertainment, art. Of a well attended wedding feast in western Iceland, in the year 1119, which is copiously described in an old saga, we hear that the guests entertained one another by merry verses and by telling of sagas. The host himself, a clergyman, was a poet and saga-teller at the same time, and one of the guests told quite a series of sagas, one of which, it is said, was composed by himself. The subject of the sagas is indicated, and in the old account they are naively characterized as "lying sagas" which, by the authority of a Norwegian king, are said to be the most entertaining ones.

The account confirms what we learn from the extant saga manuscripts themselves, that there were two kinds of popular stories, pure fiction and historical novels. It has been a matter of discussion among scholars which of these two kinds was the older and laid the true foundation of saga style. I see no sufficient reason for assigning to the one kind a precedence of age over the other; I think their development was parallel and contemporary.

As a matter of fact, the great majority of the oldest sagas preserved are the historical ones, the

so-called family sagas, telling stories from the life of the old aristocracy in Iceland. So there is no doubt that, to a great extent, the family interests of the leading aristocracy have been the determining factor in the selection of subjects by the saga-tellers. In the main, the sagas are products of a highly aristocratic society, exiled in a far-off island, where history and natural conditions combined to promote a lively interest in traditions, in stories, and in literary art.

Evidently the artistic rules of the sagas were formed and settled while they were still living in oral tradition. We know of no Icelandic saga put into writing before the close of the twelfth century, and when they were then written down, after having been kept alive by passing from tongue to tongue through two hundred years, there were already developed certain conventions about the manner of telling. Otherwise it would be inconceivable that the saga-books should have received so uniform a character and such early perfection.

Particularly, this holds true as to the style of telling, properly speaking. Every reader of the sagas must be struck by their oral style; they address themselves to your ear, not to your eye. But they do not talk to you as people do in chance conversation, using haphazard phrases and words without selection. On the contrary, every sentence is thoroughly pondered beforehand: it is pregnant and smooth at the same time, and the whole presentment has a firmness and a consistency truly impressive.

Such a style is not obtained unconsciously, it is the result of the labor of generations. This is much more than a gratuitous assertion, there are instances

to prove it. We may compare the style of the sagas with that of contemporary literary products, and we cannot help noticing how in the latter the language is stiff and hard, literary in a bad sense, formed by the example of Latin, which in fact, according to the phrase of the epoch itself, was regarded as the true "literary language" (*bókmál*).

We may even witness the competition of both manners of writing in the sagas themselves. One of the earliest of them, the Saga of King Sverri, is preserved in two rather different redactions. The course of events is practically identical in both of them, and, generally, they run together almost sentence by sentence; the difference is in the phraseology. One of the texts is much more verbose than the other; in a single short chapter it contains forty per cent more words without giving a bit of additional information. It is clearly inferior as to the pregnancy of words employed, and more especially it is characterized by the doubling of words, continually saying for instance "rearing and fostering," "joke and jest," "ways and manners," etc. It is the clerical style intruding into the sagas; but the more remarkable it is that, in the other old copy of Sverri's Saga, this manner is completely absent, and you have the pleasure of finding again the pure saga style, the result of an artist's purpose.

In other respects, too, the art of the sagas has been worked out in the oral tradition. So, in all of them you find a stereotyped way of introducing new persons, almost without exception by giving their extraction. This manner attests to the strong genealogical interest of the Icelanders, but it is at the same time the thing that tires modern readers most. On

the other hand, there is the rule of giving the characters of people indirectly, by way of conversation and talk; that is a manner of art that appeals most strongly to our literary taste.

Passing from such generalities, it appears extremely difficult to define in each particular case the exact relation—the identity or the difference—between oral and written saga. For a very long time, it was the dominating theory that the saga-writers simply put down the oral tradition such as they heard it, and there was no question of personal authorship, but as the single sagas were analyzed as to their origins and foundations, it was more and more recognized that the matter could not be so simple as that. Evidently, in the transition from tongue to pen, a new element of activity was introduced, but to what extent the single writer treated his stories as an independent master, we cannot determine with absolute certainty, simply because we possess only the final work. ✓

We cannot but deplore that the gramophone disk was not invented at that time; it would have been exceedingly interesting to listen to one of the old saga-tellers. We know popular story-tellers from the last century, and their stories have been taken down in writing by men who had no pretension to being authors, but we dare not identify these modern story-tellers with those of olden times, whatever may be the similarity between them, and we shall have to be very careful about our conclusions.

It is instructive to see that the story-tellers of our own day have developed, or rather inherited, a fixed conventional style, adapted to their literary domain, and we notice that, on the other hand,

modern stories are generally very short, apt to be told in a single sitting. In this respect they evidently differ from the Icelandic sagas, which very often would occupy a series of nights. But we are tempted to suspect that the sagas, too, were not so long in the oral tradition as they became in writing, that perhaps the complete saga was not told before an audience, but only distinct episodes. I recall the story of the young Icelander who, at the court of King Harold Hardrádi, did not tell the whole saga of the King, but exclusively the saga of his fights in Byzantine service.

The sagas themselves, such as they have come down to us, seem to bear out a like conclusion. The very length of them points in that direction. The Saga of Burnt Njál would demand more than twenty hours to be told, the Saga of Egil Skallagrimsson perhaps fifteen hours. Moreover, we observe that both these sagas are composed of two distinct parts. The Saga of King Sverri is composed of at least three separate stories, and we can clearly perceive the traces of the author's binding these stories together by means of purely chronological links. In some cases the writer may have found it necessary to abridge the episodes transmitted in order to give his book a reasonable length; in other cases he may have been interested in expanding some of the most exciting scenes. In no case has he played the part of a mere typewriter in transmitting his stories; always he is an intelligent man who wishes to present to contemporaries and to posterity a coherent work, as perfect as possible.

Such a statement of the activity of the saga-writers does not tend to underrate the importance of the

oral tradition. Undoubtedly they were guided by the rules of art that dominated the oral saga, and they took over the chief contents of the previous tradition, but it must be admitted that the act of writing meant a new step in the evolution of the saga, and it is interesting to study the causes that brought about the new epoch.

The eleventh century began to develop the oral saga as an instrument of entertainment and of family tradition. The twelfth century built the foundation of historical learning.

It is impossible to think of this century of learning without connecting it with the general intellectual movement which a distinguished American scholar, Professor Haskins of Harvard University, in a significant study, has called the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century. Indeed, we are informed that the very pioneer of historical learning in Iceland, Sæmund called the Wise, had gone to study in France at the end of the eleventh century, and in the next century he was followed by many countrymen who went abroad, to England, Germany, France, the Low Countries, and even Italy, to get a learned education. In this century we see flourishing in Iceland an industrious activity in all branches of learning and sciences. European works were translated or compiled in the vernacular, and, what is particularly remarkable, even works of personal observation, independent of authorities, were produced, especially in astronomy and in phonetics. But most popular and most important were the historical studies, and the Icelanders made themselves the historians of the Scandinavian North.

A Danish author, Saxo Grammaticus, who wrote

the history of his own nation in Latin about the year 1200, quoted "the industrious Icelanders" among his chief sources, and he said: "They are happy to spend their whole life promoting knowledge about the deeds of other peoples. It is their pleasure to study the affairs of all nations and tell about them to others, and they take just as much pride in presenting the acts of virtue and manhood of others as in performing such acts themselves. I have diligently consulted their treasures of true stories, which I have made the basis of a great part of my work, and I would not reject such authorities well versed in all ancient matters."

In the same way, a Norwegian author who, about the same time, wrote a short history of the kings of Norway in Latin, referred to the Icelanders for a point of chronology, and added: "Undoubtedly, above all nations of the North, they have always been the most inquiring and the best informed in all such questions."

At the beginning of the twelfth century, Saemund the Wise, following the example of foreign scholars, laid the foundation of chronological studies in Iceland. His work was continued and completed by his kinsman, Ari the Wise, who, about 1130, wrote the political and ecclesiastical history of Iceland. While Saemund had written in Latin, Ari wrote in the Norse language. His work was not a saga; it had a purely scientific character, but it is evidently based upon saga tradition, which here is critically treated in an almost irreproachable manner. All ensuing historical authorship in Iceland, during two hundred years, had its basis in the researches of Ari.

The spirit of learning, so introduced in the domain

of history, naturally took hold of the ancient traditions, and we have plenty of testimony to the antiquarian interest that was now awakened. In the middle of the twelfth century the Icelanders began to collect and copy the old mythical and heroic poems, and poets arose who found a pleasure in singing about ancient events and deceased kings who could give them no reward for their labor. An Icelander assisted an emigrated Norwegian, an earl of the Orkneys, in composing an elaborate poem which enumerated and praised the most celebrated heroes of Scandinavian tradition and, after them, the whole series of Norwegian kings. As the background of this poem, we discern many heroic sagas living in the tradition; and, probably at the same time, we see a great number of family sagas made the basis of another poem of the same kind. No trace of poetry is to be found in such versification. The art displayed is of a merely formal kind, but it points forward towards an historical treatment of the saga material, or, combining the same elements in the opposite order, the introduction of the art of saga in pure history.

It was the natural consequence of the intellectual movement which has here been sketched, that the first sagas to be put into writing were the historical ones. I am in duty bound to add that, in making this statement, I come into contradiction with the opinion which until recently was upheld by most scholars. Formerly it was generally asserted that the family sagas, which are more in the nature of historical novels, preceded the true historical sagas also in their written form, and that the chief period of putting the family sagas into final form was the three

last decades of the twelfth century, which, therefore, was styled the golden age of saga-writing.

Everybody now agrees that this theory is an outcome of a chain of inferences which rightly must be called rather loose, and that it is purely hypothetical. Indeed, there is no real fact to sustain it; in the form in which they are preserved, all the family sagas certainly belong to the thirteenth century. This truth has been demonstrated and impressed upon us by the critical researches of later years, and ever more generally it has been acknowledged that the writing of the family sagas does not constitute the beginning of saga-writing, but is a later product of it.

It seems surprising, however, that the historical sagas first composed did not take their subjects from the history of Iceland, but from that of Norway. And yet, from the conditions in existence, that was almost the sole possibility. The pure Icelandic sagas still maintained the character of art and entertainment so strongly stamped upon them that they could not easily come to be considered as historical works, before real historical sagas had come into existence. From the point of view of those days, the history of private people was not history in the true sense. There was no other history than that of kingdoms or bishoprics, and, in spite of political separation, the Icelanders still looked to Norway as their national home, to the Norwegian kings as their national masters. So the history of the kingdom of Norway was to them their national history, and when the founders of historical research in Iceland, Saemund and Ari, took up the task of creating a

chronological system, they both did it by establishing a chronology of the Norwegian kings.

No doubt, it was not without consequences for the intellectual union of the two nations, the old one in Norway and the young one in Iceland, that, from the middle of the twelfth century, a Norwegian archbishop's see was erected at Nidaros and became the superior of both bishoprics in Iceland. At the great celebration of Saint Olaf's Day in the Christ Church of Nidaros, in the year after the erection of the archbishopric, an Icelandic poet recited a lengthy poem about the holiness and the miracles of the national saint of Norway, evidently founded upon traditions gathered in that country. Some few years later, probably about 1160, a Saga of Saint Olaf, now preserved only in fragments, was put into writing in Iceland. This is the oldest written saga that we know about.

The literary language of the Norwegian Church was, of course, Latin. In the years following, the legend of Saint Olaf was written in that language by some clergyman at Nidaros, in part by the archbishop himself. Then, two Icelandic monks wrote in Latin the legendary history of the predecessor of Saint Olaf, the first King Olaf (Tryggvason) who, from an ecclesiastical point of view, was almost as interesting as the Saint, because he had founded the Christian Church in Norway as well as in Iceland. There is nothing surprising in the fact that, at the same time, a profane historiography in Latin began to develop. According to an hypothesis of mine, it was a monk at Bergen who, about the year 1170, undertook to write a short history of Norway in the

precious style of the day, and a decade later a monk at Nidaros accomplished the same task, although his Latin was of a less pretentious kind. Professedly the latter, and probably the former of these historiographers, based their work upon the researches of the Icelanders. The outlook seemed to be for a development of a Latin historiography in Norway, such as came into existence in Denmark exactly at the same time, and one would almost expect the same of Iceland. Immediately after the opening of the thirteenth century, one of the monks who had written the legendary history of the first King Olaf of Norway became the founder of the ecclesiastical history of Iceland by writing in Latin the life of the first incumbent of one of the episcopal sees of the country.

But the development in this direction was cut short by the overwhelming advance of the historical saga, written in the vernacular. This was a turn that had more than merely literary reasons. In order to understand it, it is necessary to take into consideration the strong national character of the Church, particularly in Iceland.

Certainly, the whole Church of Norway had many traits of a national spirit as an inheritance from her Anglo-Saxon origin. The Church of England, as directed by King Alfred and his successors during the tenth century, differed from the churches of the continent in her extensive use of the vernacular and her interest in national life as a whole, and the Church of Norway was established and organized by bishops and clergymen coming from England, educated in such intellectual environs. Right down to the close of the eleventh century the Norwegian Church was

absolutely dominated by the kings, one of them, King Harold Hardrádi, bluntly proclaiming that he recognized no archbishop in his kingdom but himself, and for some centuries the landed aristocracy of the country kept a great part of the clergy directly in its service.

In a still more marked degree was this the case in Iceland. Here the Church was throughout organized as a part of the aristocratic power. The first bishop's see there was established in such a way that one of the great chieftains made himself a bishop and donated his estate as the foundation of the bishopric. He had enjoyed a clerical education in Germany, and it is quite astonishing to observe how many of the local chiefs in Iceland were clergymen by training, though not by occupation. At the same time, all of them had the patronage of churches situated on their estates, and the priests appointed by them were in their service. In Iceland the clergy could hardly be said to form a separate order of the commonwealth. It was almost completely merged in the secular society; the Church estates were in the hands of the laity, and it is characteristic that it was never possible to make celibacy prevail. There came zealous bishops who struggled with uncompromising devotion for the moral and ecclesiastical ideals of the Roman Church, and from the beginning of the fourteenth century the clergy rose to independent power, but during all the preceding centuries, the Icelandic clergymen, in consequence of their whole position, felt more like members of a national society than like representatives of an international Church.

Naturally, their literary interests turned towards national subjects and forms. I have mentioned casu-

ally that the host who distinguished himself as a saga-teller at the great wedding feast in 1119 was a clergyman, and in the writing of sagas Icelandic clergymen, or men with a clerical education, took a prominent part. Learned interests, aristocratic traditions, and national instincts combined to make them vehicles of a true historical literature, written in the vernacular and formed from the model of home-grown artistic rules.

The pioneer of secular saga-writing was a man named Eirik Oddsson. We know nothing about his life or personality, and his work has been lost, but from quotations and from comparisons of texts, we are able to reconstruct the outlines of it, and it is extremely interesting to see where he got the subject of his saga-book: it came from contemporary history. There has been much controversial discussion about the probable time limits of his work, but the discussion seems to have resulted in the agreement to credit him for the period of Norwegian history extending from 1130 to 1161. That means that the book was composed towards 1170, and it treats the first periods of the Civil Wars in Norway. The subject itself might recall to an Icelander the contents of many family sagas of his own country, with all their quarrels and fights; but the interesting fact is the curiosity of the author and of his readers about actual events. He has put into writing partly what he himself has seen occurring in Norway, partly what he has heard from the lips of participants in the events. He has made a book out of what other men were wont to tell before audiences at feasts or in general Things. It is the oral report that has passed into literature. The spirit of learning we per-

ceive in the conscientious indications of sources that characterize the work.

Such was the beginning, such the origins of saga-writing. And from the lost book of Eirik Oddsson there is a direct and short line to another work of contemporary history of Norway, one of the most remarkable and curious sagas preserved, the Saga of King Sverri, partly an autobiography of that extraordinary man. In the genesis of this saga new motives are coming forward, and the art of the Icelanders is made use of for new purposes. We shall here be obliged to transfer our attention to the domain of Norwegian political life, and we shall find roots of the saga in Norway too, but it must be remembered that the art of the saga was created in Iceland. It was a result and an expression of Icelandic genius and Icelandic conditions. Perhaps we may say that the saga grew to be so perfect just because it was inspired by such intimate national feelings and traditions, though we do not forget the characteristic combination in Icelandic life of isolation and breadth of outlook.

THE EARLIEST WRITTEN SAGAS

FOR two and a half centuries the kings of Norway had been seeking poets who were able to compose artful eulogies in verse celebrating their battles and victories, and with unwavering fidelity Iceland had satisfied the demand. But towards the close of the twelfth century we observe a change of character in the Norwegian kings. They were no longer such exclusively military chiefs as they had been before. The task of government was constantly expanding; they became statesmen instead of warriors. Finally, the government of the nation acquired an independent existence as a stable institution, and the personality of the king moved into the background. This development very naturally destroyed the manufacture of royal poetry. The kings ceased to appreciate the celebrating of merely warlike achievements; they became eager to be the subjects of political history. Following the established law of supply and demand, the Icelanders gave up poetry and made themselves royal historians.

The period was not merely one of quiet transition; it was an epoch of sharply conflicting forces and ideas, an age of civil wars and new enterprises of organization. We can discern the preparation of a political revolution throughout the whole twelfth century, and we see the results beginning to take articulate shape in the rule of two remarkable men,

one a priest, the other a nobleman, Archbishop Eystein of Nidaros and Earl Erling Wry-Neck, who governed the kingdom jointly on behalf of the boy king Magnus from the year 1163. In all probability it was Archbishop Eystein who was responsible for the composition of that Latin history of Norway which was written and dedicated to him shortly before 1180.

But the new policies were first realized by the great opponent of these two men, that extraordinary personage, King Sverri, who stripped them of their power, who made himself master of all they had built up, who systematized and carried through on a grand scale what they had gropingly begun in governmental organization, who, in short, transformed a gradual development into a revolution. This man became the real creator of the historical saga-writing of Norway, the subject of the oldest existing royal saga and, in part, its author.

Educated as a cleric, he came to Norway from the distant Faroe Islands and conquered the kingdom. Was he really a king's son, as he pretended, or was he simply an impostor? Nobody can answer the question definitely. In any case, he maintained his assertion to the last breath of his life, and he knew how to arouse the enthusiasm of his men to the point of devotion. The story of his conquest of Norway, starting with a company of seventy poor and desperate men, fighting a popular king who was the anointed sovereign and had at his back a united aristocracy, sounds like a fairy tale. He represented himself as the defender of conservatism; to the recent idea of kingship by divine right, exemplified by King Magnus, he opposed the old-fashioned national

kingship by popular assent. At the same time he inflamed the minds of the people against the hereditary power of the old nobility. In reality he strove to build up a royal government, imbued with the ideas of Anglo-Norman feudalism, resting upon a class of noblemen created by the king and faithful to his service; and after a hard struggle, he succeeded. All his rivals were overthrown.

Immediately after the decisive victory over his original adversary, King Magnus, he set about having his own history, his saga, written. In the year 1185 he met at Nidaros an Icelandic abbot named Karl, coming from a monastery where historical studies were eagerly cultivated; it was two of the monks there who at that time wrote in Latin the legendary history of the first King Olaf, besides other historical works. Now the abbot undertook to write the saga of King Sverri, and we are expressly told that the King sat with him dictating as he wrote. Certainly, in the Icelfander the King found a man who knew the art of telling a saga and who enjoyed putting into writing the extraordinary adventures of the King. But there is no doubt that the initiative was on the side of the King.

The enterprise was unprecedented in the annals of Norway, but looking around in the world of Western Europe at that time, we discover that King Sverri was only following the example of other kings and statesmen. One might almost say that the twelfth century was the period of greatest activity in official historiography in Europe. During a space of fifteen years, down to his death in 1152, the great French statesman, Abbot Suger, was busy writing the history of the two kings, Louis VI and Louis

VII, whom he had served as their closest confidential adviser. At the end of the 1150s one of the greatest historians of the Middle Ages, Bishop Otto of Freising, wrote the history of the reign of his own nephew, the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, and the Emperor himself furnished the material for the work. Towards the close of the century, King Henry II of England had his history written by an officer of his court, perhaps the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and this work was continued under Henry's sons and successors Richard the Lionhearted and John Lackland.

Mentioning here such statesmen as Emperor Frederick, Abbot Suger, and King Henry II, I give the names of the very men who were the chief models of King Sverri; in particular, he was allied with the king of England, even receiving military assistance from John Lackland. It may reasonably be presumed that, at least in part, the literary activity of these statesmen was known at the Northern courts. At all events, it is a remarkable coincidence that in this very decade of 1180-90 the leading statesman of Denmark, Archbishop Absalon, the friend of two kings, charged one of his clerks, the celebrated Saxo Grammaticus, with the duty of writing the history of his kings, a task which he accomplished in an elegant but rather involved Latin style.

The king of Norway chose a different line in so far as he directed his history to be written in the tongue of his people. This fact is the more remarkable as both he himself and his literary assistant were men of clerical education. It is clear evidence of the strength already attained by the saga tradition of Iceland. Besides, we happen to know that King

Sverri was fond of listening to story-telling, especially "lying sagas," even of telling short stories himself, and in one of the first chapters of his saga we find a reference to a popular fairy tale. He might have a reason for rejecting the learned Latin language, inasmuch as he was in sharp conflict with the Church, particularly the Archbishop, but his chief motive in wanting to have a saga in the vernacular was his purpose to go to the people with his story.

No more than other kings, and no more than other candidates for election, did he think of having his history written merely for the sake of a good story. What he wanted was a piece of propaganda. He wished to convince his people that he was really the man he pretended to be, and he was a shrewd and experienced propagandist. Reports of his speeches prove him to be a man of great imagination, very well able to arouse the instincts and the sympathies of his audience in his favor. In the conflict with the Church, he issued a polemical pamphlet, manifestly intended to be read before the people all over the country, and, although reiterating the arguments of Italian jurisconsults in favor of the imperial power of Frederick Barbarossa, this treatise defines the principles of secular supremacy with a sharpness which anticipates the revolutionary theorists of a hundred years later. We have testimony that, at his court, King Sverri was accustomed to have people tell stories about the habits of his adversaries, and a series of expressions in his saga show plainly that he meant it to be told in the manner of popular literature.

As a work of propaganda, the Saga of King Sverri rivals the famous Commentaries of Cæsar. The po-

litical tendency never intrudes itself upon the reader or the listener. The book merely tells a story; but the tale itself unobtrusively guides the listener's thoughts in a certain direction. He hears how God is steadily holding his hand over the young man who otherwise is quite alone in the world, and conducts him safely through every sort of danger. Even if we are not apt to be particularly impressed by all the dreams through which the saints prepare Sverri for his royal dignity, and which, in fact, are the only proofs of his royal birth, we must remember that in those days dreams were holy revelations of secret things. Besides, they played a prominent part in all sagas, they belonged to the very art of the saga, and as a piece of art this saga is throughout an excellent performance, well constructed and well told. It reads like an exciting novel.

As a matter of course King Sverri could not actively direct the writing of more than the first part of the saga. But it demanded a continuation, and it was continued, in my opinion bit by bit, so that finally a learned man, evidently an Icelander, had to knit together the separate pieces into a whole. This finishing editorial work was done, I think, about the year 1220, twenty years after the death of the King.

Even before that time, however, the historical composition inaugurated by Sverri's Saga had given the impetus to the production of additional sagas of Norwegian history. It is even likely that Sverri himself arranged to have a book written about the reign of all his predecessors in Norway, this too a book with a program, exalting the hereditary monarchy, the high royal power, and the national glory of the Norwegian kings as defenders of the nation.

So, before the close of the twelfth century, saga literature was founded. It was not sagas in the old sense of the word which in this way were put into writing, it was not old oral tradition that was preserved to a posterity less versed in ancient lore. It was learning and politics that combined to make use of the art of the saga.

What was thus initiated in Norway, founded, to be sure, upon a specifically Icelandic acquisition, was immediately continued in Iceland itself. I do not wish to imply that the enterprise of King Sverri is to be considered as the actual occasion of saga-writing in Iceland. I shall later call attention to some facts which seem to point to a real connection between the literary activity in Iceland and that in Norway, but on the whole I have no doubt that the idea of writing sagas was in Iceland the outcome of a quite independent movement, in some degree parallel to Norwegian development.

What politics accomplished in Norway was effected by ecclesiastical interests in Iceland. As the kings wished to obtain popular support in Norway, so the Church of Iceland was eager to have the nation with her. In both cases it became necessary to address the people in its own language, and in both cases the natural way was the adaptation of the saga art already perfected.

One of the monks who composed a Latin history of the first King Olaf of Norway likewise wrote, in one of the very first years of the thirteenth century, a Latin work on the life of the first bishop in his (the northern) part of Iceland. It appears fitting that the life of this bishop should have been written in Latin since, contrary to almost all other churchmen in Ice-

land, he was a fanatical enemy of all national traditions of the past, striving to obliterate all memories of a character in any way heathen. It was no long time, however, before this ecclesiastical biography, precisely as in the case of the Latin books about King Olaf, was translated into the vernacular, with the consequence that the Latin originals disappeared completely, and only a few years after the compilation of the Latin work about the bishop of northern Iceland, an official of the southern bishop's see undertook to write the biographies of the incumbents of that see in the language of the true Icelandic sagas.

It was only this historical literature in the vernacular that was continued. From the beginning of the thirteenth century we see the results of an industrious activity in writing real sagas dealing with the ecclesiastical history of Iceland, in particular with its bishops, and it is noteworthy that one of the earliest of these sagas, which must all be presumed to express the orthodox ecclesiastical view, refers with admiration to King Sverri, that great adversary of the Church power, quoting him as a man who was as competent in speaking as he was intelligent in thinking.

The bishops' sagas * bear the definite stamp of the interests that produced them. They proclaim it as a most important thing to get knowledge about the progress of Christianity and the Church in Iceland; they are devotional just as much as historical literature, and so, like Sverri's Saga, they belong in the field of propaganda, though they, too, avoid direct

* English translations (by Mrs. Disney Leith), London, 1895, and in the *Origines Islandicæ*.

pleading for the most part. They may emphasize the need, felt by the bishops, of fighting bad customs and of curbing the obstinacy of the people, and they may hold up shining examples of generosity towards the Church, but they do this by the method of narrative, not by preaching. The demands of ecclesiastical policy are rarely put forward in a very sharp form; the main stress is laid upon purely moral ideals.

Generally, the subject in itself cannot have the same dramatic interest as the ordinary saga or even the history of the civil wars in Norway, and one easily observes the learned preoccupations of the clerical authors in the explicit chronological data which accompany the narrative. Yet, although they had no opportunity of founding their historical statements upon any connected oral tradition, thus being authors in the full sense of the word, the diction of their writings is direct and smooth, tinged, as was to be expected, with Latin rhetoric, but at the same time evidently striving to imitate the conventions of the saga. In this respect, there is an obvious progress from the earlier to the later of the bishops' sagas, vivid speeches and dramatic episodes taking a more and more prominent place in them.

With these works the beginning was made, and the age of Icelandic saga-writing followed quickly. It was like opening a river long damned up. A store of sagas lived in the hearts and on the lips of the people, waiting, as it were, for release. At the same time, there was an abundance of true historical interest and learning. The only thing lacking was the union of the two forces, and now it came. Of a sudden, educated men discovered the inherent interest of all the popular tales and traditions of the past,

and seized on them as a precious treasure. Wherever the art of writing was at home, sagas were produced. They almost flooded the country. The intellectual leaders of the people were seized by an antiquarian passion that laid hold not only of sagas, but of all things of the past. Even in decorative art, in engravings in wood and ivory, we notice the tendency to retain and imitate old forms. Old poetry, even though absolutely heathen, was revived and studied. But the great achievement of the age was the writing of the sagas.

We should, however, be profoundly mistaken if we thought of this activity as merely sprung from antiquarian interest. Certainly the writers found an intimate pleasure in the tales themselves and enjoyed their art. We cannot fail to see the spiritual connection between saga-writing in Iceland and the mighty current of popular legends which, coming in part from the Orient, just at this time swept over the whole of Western Europe. The twelfth and, in particular, the thirteenth centuries are the golden age of the folk-tale in European life. Clergymen, perhaps usually Franciscan and Dominican preachers, carried the tales all over the Western world, using them as "examples" in their sermons, and in this way whole collections of tales have come down to us. When a preacher saw his congregation falling asleep over his theological or moral teachings, he had only to begin with the promising words: "Once upon a time there was a king and a queen," to rouse his congregation to eager attention. People enjoyed stories.

We know very well that this wave of popular tales reached both Norway and Iceland early in the

thirteenth century. Oriental and other foreign motives gained a place in local story-telling. It is true that they seldom crept into the stock of Icelandic family sagas; these had previously acquired their essential form, but elsewhere we meet them in abundance, and I think there can be no doubt they re-enforced the general liking for stories. Coming often through clerical intermediaries, they helped in raising the prestige and interest of the national tales, the sagas. It became a respectable occupation to put them into writing.

Who, then, were the writers of the sagas? They are all anonymous. They did not think of themselves as authors, they served only to transmit to posterity the traditions of the past. As a matter of fact, they handled the material of tradition in a rather personal way, but they were not always conscious of the liberties they took, they were convinced that they were acting in accordance with the facts as they received them. Even if they pretended to real authorship, they preferred to remain anonymous. We should remember that even such outstanding figures in Icelandic historical literature as Ari the Wise and Snorri Sturluson did not affix their names to their works, so that their authorship has to be proved by some other testimony, and, indeed, it has been disputed. The people of that time might have many ambitions, but to gain a literary or scientific reputation had not become the fashion. Fame belonged to the man of action, not to the scholar.

So the personalities of the writers of sagas are unknown to us, and we must admit that, in most cases, their works are marked by individual features to so slight an extent that it would be unwise to make

guesses as to the authors. Yet some general considerations may at least lead us to a general conclusion, and I think research into the sagas has made it tolerably clear that a good many of them have been given literary form by priests or monks. As a matter of fact, they constituted almost the only literate class in those days. In the old Norse and Icelandic language the word "learned man" meant simply a cleric. It has been observed that the great majority of Icelandic family sagas are connected with localities where monasteries had existed since the twelfth century. In the sagas themselves we are often able to trace ecclesiastical interests—an inclination to insert information about monasteries and churches and other ecclesiastical matter.

Then there are the scholarly interests that distinguish so many of the sagas, and, in my opinion, they give the clearest evidence of the intimate connection between the writing of the family sagas and the authorship of learned historical works, such as the bishops' sagas and the Norwegian kings' sagas. I think we see the transition from the one kind to the other very distinctly in analyzing one of the earliest and, at the same time, one of the most fascinating of the family sagas, the saga about the poet Egil Skallagrímsson.*

This saga begins its narrative with the first days of King Harold Fairhair, who united the kingdom of Norway towards the close of the ninth century, and it ends with the introduction of Christianity in Iceland in the year 1000. Its chief hero is of course Egil himself, who, according to the saga, was born in one of the very first years of the tenth century,

* Translated into English by W. C. Green, London, 1893.

and died an old man shortly after 980. But the saga embraces a period of much more than a hundred years, and it tells of four generations of men. Obviously it is composed of at least two distinct parts. The first part contains the story of Egil's ancestors in Norway, his grandfather, father, and uncle. The second part is the story of Egil's life from birth to death; but this part again falls into several separate episodes, telling particularly about Egil's different journeys abroad from Iceland.

If you take each one of these parts and episodes by itself, you will find them on the whole consistent each within itself. There is a clear narrative, evidently in the main rendering oral tradition. But in the connecting of the separate parts the author has had recourse to learned research, and there is no doubt that he has accepted as the basis of his construction the chronology recently worked out for the kings of Norway. Personally I am of the opinion that, so far as it concerns history older than the second half of the tenth century, this chronology is false, and by accepting it the author of Egil's Saga brings himself into conflict with established dates in the history of England. But this point is not so essential for the study of the character of the saga itself. What matters here is the simple statement that the author, in arranging his pieces of tradition, has striven to adapt them to a chronological scheme borrowed from Norwegian history. In his performance of this task we perceive that the author is a learned man, and we become certain that he had before him a written saga about the kings of Norway.

But it is much more than this chronological frame-

work which attests to the learned, antiquarian interests of the writer of Egil's Saga. In reading the first part of it, telling about events in Norway before the family emigrated to Iceland, one cannot but be struck by the way in which it gives general information about Norwegian history, in particular about the conquest and the organization of the country by King Harold Fairhair. In fact, much of this matter is literally copied from some Norwegian king's saga.

The most interesting and also the most independent part of the narrative of old Norwegian events is, however, the account of the exploits of Egil's uncle Thorolf as governor of the northernmost district of Norway and, above all, of his relations with the Finns (or Laplanders), the aborigines of Finnmark. This whole story has such a strongly local character that instinctively one would doubt that it could exist as an Icelandic tradition, and, from a purely linguistic point of view, it has recently been argued that here is a bit of pure Norwegian saga tradition transferred to Iceland. Now it happens that there is some other evidence of a family saga living in oral tradition just in this northern part of Norway and connected with Norwegian descendants of the same family, which, however, became extinct as early as the close of the eleventh century, while in Iceland the family continued to prosper through many generations. The easiest explanation seems to be that the author of Egil's Saga has retained pure Icelandic tradition, but has had it supplemented by information sought in Norway. Studying his account of the local governor's taxation of the Finns, his commerce and his fighting with them, one is immediately struck by the points of analogy in the report of a Norwegian chieftain given

to King Alfred of England at the close of the ninth century. On the other hand, there are conspicuous anachronisms as well, particularly in regard to alleged competition with emissaries of the Russian government of Great Novgorod, which at the earliest could not be expected to turn up here in the north before some time in the course of the twelfth century. Moreover, the treatment of the Laplanders, as described in the saga, certainly was continued by the king's governors in northern Norway down to this period and probably later. The inference is that the author has made a serious effort in order to picture ancient conditions, but he has not been able to reach very far back of his own times.

A similar observation we have to make as to the later parts of the saga. The author has a keen interest in the laws of the past; he tells us that such and such was the law of bygone times, and he details the rules of legal procedure according to such law. To be sure, he represents a form of legislation which did not exist any longer in his times, but from this one must not conclude that it was really in existence in the period he is telling about. On the contrary, we can see essential mistakes in his notions of former conditions.

I choose just one instance, which, I must admit, is not beyond doubt, but which appears to me very characteristic of the principles of research predominant in Icelandic saga-writing—perhaps even characteristic of critical principles prevailing down to modern times. I refer to the pretended legal institution of trial by battle, by duel (*holmganga*). Indeed, Egil's Saga is our chief source for the legal rules of such trials, and it pretends to inform us that,

in the tenth century, it was a legal way of acquiring allodial lands to challenge the proprietor to a duel and, having slain him, to appropriate his estates without regard to his heirs. The saga might persuade us to believe its statement that on a certain occasion the duel was resorted to as the final recourse after exhausting all other legal means, but the general extension of the duel, completely replacing all legal procedure, is absolutely incredible, contradictory to all principles of law otherwise governing old Norse society. Indeed, there is no evidence of the existence of the duel as a legal remedy in Norwegian or Icelandic law, except the assertions of sagas from the thirteenth century, some of them of a very romantic character. Not the smallest trace of it is to be found in the laws themselves, and true history knows nothing of it. It seems rather strange that modern legal historians have put any confidence in such stories. To the saga-writers of the thirteenth century, however, the institution of trial by battle might appear a very natural appurtenance of heathen days, just because it did not exist in their own times. They were looking for the contrast between old and new, and their conception of the Saga Age was that of an age of battle and fighting, the ever recurring subject of all the sagas.

Now, what I have said about the antiquarian researches and mistakes of the author of *Egil's Saga* is not meant to give you the impression of a work that has failed of its purpose. On the contrary, all these things constitute no more than external details in the saga. They show us some of the interests of the writer, and they teach us much about the origins of *saga-writing*. But they cannot obscure the high artistic

merits of this saga, standing at the very entrance of the classic age of Icelandic literature.

Egil's Saga does not attain that unity of construction which is the distinguishing feature of a well told story, but every single episode has a dramatic quality of its own, and the whole saga has a real unity in its picturing of the chief actors in the event. There is an increasing tension in the introductory part, where we follow the preparations, the growth, and the final outburst of the conflict between Egil's ancestors and King Harold Fairhair. We are initiated into a true dramatic intrigue contrived by enemies of Egil's uncle Thorolf with the aim of sowing suspicion and hatred against him in the mind of the King, and our active sympathy is aroused as we see how quite innocent acts of the upright Thorolf must serve the purpose of the slanderers. Yet even here the chief interest is in the drawing of the characters. The reader becomes personally acquainted with old Kveldulf, the grandfather of Egil, who has no wider range of vision than his local power and his family interests, a man of pre-national Norway, who watches the rise of the new kingdom with gloomy forebodings. Of the sons, the older, Thorolf, goes ahead in perfect unconcern, trusting in his natural strength and loyalty, while the younger, Skallagrim, is preoccupied with his personal claims and full of suspicion towards other people. The enemies of Thorolf are pictured more in the vein of stage villains; but by way of compensation, this saga is the only one in the whole of Norse literature which makes a serious attempt at portraying the celebrated founder of the kingdom of Norway, Harold Fairhair, and a brilliant portrait it is indeed,

composed, as was to be expected, according to the general Icelandic conception of Harold as a tyrant, but worked out with individual traits that make the man living to us. We feel in this portrait the inner power of a really great, although anything but amiable man, one who understands how to conceal his ideas and sentiments, and who makes up his plans without consideration of anything but his royal power, a man of sinister self-control and terrible rapidity of stroke.

Thorolf falls a victim to slander and politics. Kveldulf and Skallagrim take their revenge by slaying some of the King's men and relatives and then sail for Iceland. Out there begins the history of Egil, son of Skallagrim, told in the saga from childhood until death. It is the study of a character in action, constantly revealing new traits of a highly fascinating individuality and, with great art, uniting all of them in a portrait of strong psychological effect.

Already in early boyhood, Egil gives evidence of some of his dominating qualities, his irrepressible will, never yielding to anyone, even if it were his own father, and, as a consequence, his equally indomitable spirit of revenge. Of course he grew to be a giant in bodily strength, an invincible warrior, and at the age of fourteen he accompanied his older brother Thorolf in viking excursions, staying abroad for twelve years. During this time he encountered the most exciting adventures and achieved the most incredible exploits, slaying enemies everywhere. The Icelanders liked to hear how their countrymen distinguished themselves in foreign lands, always inspiring fear and admiration, and Egil surpassed all

others in deeds of prowess. He ended by assisting King Athelstane of England in his great battle with the Norse king of Ireland, and it was a matter of course that it was Egil who decided the victory won by Athelstane.

In this battle Thorolf lost his life, and on this occasion the saga exhibits mercilessly, but not without a grim humor, another trait of Egil's character—his love of gold. The saga pictures him sitting in the hall of the King, everything about him of an almost supernatural breadth—his forehead, his nose, his jaws, his chin, his neck, his shoulders—a figure of concentrated resolution. Sitting so, refusing to drink, he raised and lowered now the right brow, now the left one, until the King handed him across the fire a great golden ring. Then the brows of the giant came to rest, and he agreed to join in the drinking. After that the King gave him two heavy boxes full of silver, asking him to take them to his father and relatives in Iceland as a compensation for the loss of Thorolf. Now Egil was satisfied and happy, and so he went home to Iceland. "But," the saga adds, "it is not told that he divided the silver of King Athelstane with his father or with other men."

After a stay at home for some years, Egil went abroad again, and this time the motive was a quality of his which, perhaps, leaves us a little doubtful—a relentless craving for what he considered his right. There was land in Norway which was properly his, and finally, by the arbitrament of the duel, he succeeded in obtaining it. It must be admitted that the obstinacy of Egil in claiming his right is quite in harmony with his whole dogged character. We should be inclined to seek his motive rather in selfishness

than in a sense of justice; but, on the other hand, we find him a faithful friend, risking his life for those whom he loved or whom he was indebted to, and sometimes we even see him performing acts of kindness. On the whole, however, there was nothing soft about him.

At the age of fifty, according to the saga, he goes off on viking excursions again, mainly, I think, in order to complete the sacrosanct number three. His chief exploit on this excursion was an expedition in the service of King Hákon of Norway to claim tribute in a Swedish province. No doubt the story of this expedition is pure invention, although it is filled with alleged verses by Egil in order to confirm its authenticity. The kings of Norway never had this Swedish province under their sway, and the exaggeration of the story becomes almost ludicrous, when we see Egil for a fight putting a large flat stone before his breast and stomach, binding it firmly to his body with a cord, in lieu of a cuirass, and then killing a great number of his adversaries.

Egil was a poet, and there are some genuine poems of his that are born of true genius. When he was an old man, his most beloved son was drowned, and under the influence of his grief he composed a poem of a tragic power that is unique in old Norse literature. Ibsen made it the basis of a similar poem in his drama *The Vikings at Helgeland*. The saga gives a pathetic picture of Egil in his sorrow, at first refusing to eat and drink, but then roused to new life by his gift of poetry.

There is both tragedy and humor in the saga's account of his last days. It is pitiful to see this giant, who always was difficult to deal with, becoming blind

and stiff with age, almost helpless, at the mercy of servants. But still he kept his stubbornness and pride. He amused himself with the grotesque idea of riding to the general Thing and there scattering for a free scramble the whole treasure he had received from the king of England. He was prevented from carrying out this plan, but later, one night when people were away for the Thing, he ordered two serfs to accompany him for a bath in one of the hot springs near by. He carried with him his two boxes of silver. When daylight came, he was seen stumbling around at a distance from the houses, but neither the boxes nor the serfs appeared again—he was suspected of having thrown them all into the waterfall. That was the last of his exploits, and one feels the impressive consistency of this powerful self-sufficient character, true to his nature to the very death.

In Egil Skallagrimsson the saga's art of psychology is already at its height.

THE ICELANDIC FAMILY SAGAS

THE whole thirteenth century saw an industrious writing of family sagas going on in Iceland. They have become an object of intense study in modern days, and many scholars have labored hard to determine the date of every single saga in order to state its place in the development, but the conclusions of such researches disagree widely among themselves, and perhaps we shall never be able to establish a complete chronology of the family sagas.

The difficulty of the task is implied in the very nature of the sagas. They aim at reproducing an oral tradition which, through the work of generations, had acquired a relatively stable form. In most cases the author has the conscious purpose of keeping his individuality out of the work he is writing, and he has done his best to efface the traces of his age.

Despairing of chronological criteria, some scholars have had recourse to the simple device of grouping the different family sagas from a geographical point of view, and there may be some justification for classifying them in such a way. As a matter of course, there must be a connection between sagas originating and written in the same literary environment, and in some cases it seems even possible to trace a difference of temper or of social character to the particular background of the saga concerned. But when we

look to the influence of landscape, we enter a dangerously subjective field, and we cannot take it for granted that medieval Icelanders were impressed by nature exactly as we are. Then, Icelandic society was not so greatly differentiated in the different parts of the country, and what strikes us about the saga literature is perhaps more its unity than its variety. Generally, it is not western or eastern, southern or northern; it is simply Icelandic.✓

Nevertheless, in spite of all such qualifications, I think it is possible to discern certain marked tendencies in the progress of saga-writing, and it would be worth while to follow them.

We are accustomed to speak of "family sagas," and the Old Norse term implies an even wider scope, meaning by family the whole great kindred, extending to almost infinite degrees. Indeed, there are family sagas, telling the story of several generations of one family, and it may happen that such a saga retains a kind of unity by virtue of the conformity of character transmitted from ancestors to descendants. But we are led to suspect that such a broad construction may rather be the work of the compiler, who has managed to bring together a series of originally separate stories.

Essentially, the saga is a story about one man, the hero of the drama. If you are more attracted by the historical truth contained in it, you may call it a biography. If you prefer to enjoy the artistic features of it, you may call it a novel. Perhaps in the saga literature itself you may discover a movement from the one stage to the other.

No doubt, the sagas are highly interested in family relations. With almost every man introduced to

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us, even if he plays no prominent part in the events, we are expected to learn his whole genealogy, ancestors and descendants alike. But this means much more than simple curiosity regarding family connections. The subject matter of the sagas was deeply rooted in an age of violent conflicts, the century preceding the final peaceful organization of the commonwealth, and in those days the family was an instrument of fighting. When a man got involved in some enmity, he felt himself to have a right to appeal to his kinsmen for assistance, and family revenge became a law of action in the sagas, as it was a part of old history.

From such circumstances historians have generally concluded that primitive Icelandic society was in fact composed of a number of kindred and family alliances, and, with few exceptions, they have not become aware that the emigration from Norway had the effect of dissolving family connections more than of strengthening them. In Iceland the immigrants settled as "squatters" in widely scattered places, and local groups under the leadership of wealthy men were more firmly welded together than kindred groups could be. In truth, the sagas tell us more about conflicts inside the kindred, between near relatives, than about feuds between different families.

But here you face one of the most tragic motives of the sagas, one of the very sources of saga-telling, a motive that held the keenest interest of the next generations—the family conflict.

In later sagas—and this is just one of the signs of a later age—you may find the admiration for a man who boasts of defying gods and men and putting his trust solely in his own strength. That is a spirit for-

eign to the older sagas. There such a man would be destined to misfortune, because they conceive—contrary to the paradox of Ibsen—a solitary man as a weak man. In ancient Iceland the man belonged to his family, not, to be sure, the wide circle of distant kindred, but the family in the narrower sense represented by those living together at the estate or in the immediate neighborhood. Nothing could break the spirit of the proud and self-sufficient Egil Skallagrimsson so much as the loss of a son; he even rebelled against the gods in his affliction at such a calamity, for he felt himself mortally wounded by this break in the wall of the family defenses; his own future was endangered with that of his family.

Therefore the ancient Icelanders could scarcely imagine a worse conflict than that arising inside a family. What the struggle between duty and love was to the great dramatists of the seventeenth century, the mainspring of the tragic action, this conflict of two opposite demands of family duty was to the authors of the saga-drama. It is the tragedy of Gisli the Outlaw that he has to avenge the killing of one brother-in-law, the brother of his wife, upon his other brother-in-law, the husband of his sister. The two men are not kinsmen at all, but both are his nearest relatives, and the tragic consequences follow irresistibly, the sister of Gisli being in duty bound to seek revenge upon her brother, the slayer of her husband; when finally she has succeeded in having her brother killed, she must seek vengeance for him too. One cannot imagine the tragic knot more complex or more complete; it recalls ancient Greek drama.

This is one instance of the fundamental theme of all Icelandic sagas, it leads you up to their chief

motive force, their almost inevitable circle of events: insult, killing, revenge.

There might be many reasons for killing a man. One of the sagas even tells of a man who killed another "just because he was standing so conveniently within range of his axe." A general disregard of human life is characteristic of all young societies; in any case we find it in Iceland of the saga age. If you applied yourself to collecting statistics of all the slayings mentioned in the sagas, you would arrive at amazing results concerning the causes of mortality in primitive Iceland; most people in those days seem to have met a violent death. You ought not, however, to take such a result at its surface value; it has its foundation in the natural selection of the sagas. They were primarily interested in drama, and they picked out for their purpose all the cases of manslaughter, because every homicide would have its consequences, demanding revenge or compensation, so leading up either to another homicide or to an exciting lawsuit.

In some few sagas you may find a different mind, an aversion to such continual killing. In one of them there occurs a man who has the surname "peace-maker," and who confesses that he feels sick at heart when he remembers how he has fought and killed; and in the Saga of Burnt Njál, the hero of the first part, the renowned and almost invincible Gunnar, wonders on one occasion whether he is less courageous than other men because he is slower to kill than they are. But such cases certainly attest to a | Christian tendency on the part of the writer; they belong to a later age of saga-telling.

The true heroes of the sagas care little for their

own lives or for those of others. Their honor demands that they speak lightly of death and danger. Not a muscle twitches, no matter how severely they may be wounded, and even in the moment of dying, laughter and raillery are on their lips. A man who has his lower lip cut off in a fight must make a joke about the loss of his beauty, which makes his kisses less desirable, and when, fighting against overwhelming odds, he must succumb, he may make an impromptu verse in mocking complaint at the disagreeable taste of blood, or he may proclaim that he is glad to die. These are the indispensable conventions of the saga, and heroes have to comply with them.

We may suspect that, in real life, people of those days were not so inflexibly heroic. In the collection of wise sayings, *Hávamál*, ascribed to the highest of gods, and presumably carried over to Iceland from Norway during the age of settlement, you will find a proverb, later accepted by most nations, which proclaims an opposite principle: "Better alive than lifeless." In fact, history gives instances even of prominent men of the very saga age who prefer life to death even though life brings dishonor. When Saint Olaf, in the year 1015, came to conquer Norway, he succeeded in capturing one of his chief opponents, the young Earl Hákon Eiríksson, and this representative of a great and ambitious family was content with accepting his life at the hand of his enemy on condition of giving his oath that he never would take arms against the victorious king.

But the sagas could make no use of such prudence. They demanded dramatic motives, and they always had to look to the revenge following the insult or the homicide. They might take for their hero a man who,

on a given occasion, chose unheroic life instead of heroic death; but then they made it their task to show that, on closer study, such an option meant a secret, fixed determination on his part to avenge himself and recover his honor.

Such is the case of the mighty chieftain Hrafnkel in Eastern Iceland, one of the early settlers of that district, about whom we have a compact little saga of a quite peculiar character.* He is pictured as from the beginning a hard and rather arbitrary ruler of those who settled in the valley he had made his own. He slew the son of a poor farmer there because of a breach of a religious interdict, and he laughed scornfully when he heard that a cousin of the slain man was suing him for the homicide. But it so happened that this cousin, Sám, secured the aid of some powerful people from Western Iceland, and he succeeded in having Hrafnkel outlawed by the Althing. Hrafnkel flouted the judgment; but immediately after he had returned to his estate, Sám with his allies appeared early one morning while everybody was still in bed. Hrafnkel asked for the life of his men; but Sám, characterized by his name ("the darky") as well as by his acts as a man of inferior kind, desired to humiliate him. First he amused himself by torturing them all, and afterwards he offered Hrafnkel his life on the condition of ceding to Sám his estate and his chieftainship. Cool and deliberate in spite of his sufferings, Hrafnkel answered: "It goes with me as with many another, that I choose life, if choice there be." Then he moved away and settled at another place.

* This saga is to be found in English translation in the *Origines Islandicæ* and in John Coles' *Summer Travelling in Iceland*.

Six years pass quietly. Hrafnkel calmly builds up a new position for himself, gathering wealth and followers. Then it is reported that a brother of Sám has come home from abroad, having by engaging in trade made himself a rich and powerful man. In a flash. Hrafnkel realizes that if a union of the two brothers is allowed to come about, the obstacles to his gaining redress for his humiliation will be almost insuperable. At this moment we see his true character and his deep-laid plans. He rides out to waylay the new enemy on his way to the brother, succeeds in slaying him, and next morning appears with his men at his former estate, where Sám is captured. Now it is Hrafnkel's turn to make his conditions: he shows no meanness in his revenge, he merely drives Sám away and allows him to live as a subordinate on his old farm, deprived of all luster of power. "There," he says, "you may be well off, if you don't aspire too high; but you will have to be my inferior as long as we both live."

The whole story is told in a quiet manner, almost as an everyday occurrence, but just in this way the author makes us feel more intensely the heat of passion glowing underneath the acts. He makes us comprehend that Hrafnkel is not a man who prefers life to honor. On the contrary, his thirst for revenge combines with the strength of his mind to make him the cool calculator who feels sure that one day he will regain the honor which seems lost, and even rise higher than he stood before. It is worthy of notice that the saga clearly implies that during his days of patient waiting he really grows to be a finer man, a man of higher moral ideals. It is the idea of honor

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that takes root more deeply in his soul and becomes the guiding force of his life.

We may be inclined to think that what the chiefs of ancient Iceland were really fighting for was above all their power as the leaders of their district and their men; but in the sagas honor always appears as the fundamental motive force, and honor demands revenge for every kind of outrage. Nor would I deny that this feeling was an actual motive in the life of the Icelanders. I recall another saying of that same collection of divine wisdom previously quoted, a saying placed quite near to the verse praising life at any price; it teaches a different lesson:

*Cattle die
and kinsmen die,
Thyself eke soon wilt die;
but one thing, I ween,
will wither never:
The doom over each one dead.**

Always a man will have to think of his fame, the judgment of contemporaries and posterity. He wants to leave to his descendants an unstained reputation as a man of honor, and the sagas have taken hold of this idea, making it the dominant force of action, because it is at once more noble and more dramatic than the mere rivalry for power. They appeal to deep instincts in every listener when they show how even a peaceable man is stirred to violent resistance by the taunt: "You cannot submit to a shame like this!"

* Translation by Lee M. Hollander.

Now we should not assume that the conception of honor, as represented by the sagas, was absolutely identical with that of our days. It is true, they make the demands of honor intimately connected with those of justice. Their idea of justice, however, is absolutely egocentric; they consider it one of the immanent duties of a man to maintain and fight for his rights to the utmost. In this duty revenge is included, but in pursuing it a man has his choice between two courses: he may take the law into his own hands, or he may seek redress in court. If he wins his case, so the sagas repeatedly state, the honor to him is just as great as though he had avenged himself by force of arms. And it does not matter in what way he wins; the result alone counts. The Icelanders evidently had a fondness for lawsuits. They were a nation of jurists, and, as in all primitive stages of law, their jurisprudence was extremely formalistic; the slightest mistake in form, even in the best case, might lead to a mistrial. In this way the trial in court became a kind of game or sport, and shrewdness a quality just as honorable as courage or manly bearing.

In one of the most remarkable sagas, put into writing relatively early, that which has become famous as the *Saga of the Eyrbyggir* (or *Ere-dwellers*) but which ought to be called that of Snorri the Temple's Chief,* you find as the hero of the tale a man who may be regarded as the type of a shrewd politician, not at all as that of an honest gentleman. He accepts money for undertaking the lawsuits of other people and then cheats his client; he is a master of legal tricks, and he does not shrink from plotting

* Translated into English in *The Saga Library*, Volume II.

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murder. With all these unprepossessing qualities, he is one of the most eager advocates of the introduction of Christianity in Iceland, and the saga states the fact simply without any hint of inconsistency. Obviously, the morality here is somewhat different from ours.

Still more strongly this aspect of honor is thrown into relief by the amusing little saga of the Banded Men.* It tells the story of a brave young man who by his personal abilities succeeds in building up a fortune and, at least to all appearance, a position of power. Now it happens that his foster-brother is killed by a man who is allied with many powerful friends, and here begins the drama of the saga, his lawsuit for revenge. He is opposed by the tricks of a powerful alliance, the "Banded Men," and, although there is no doubt about the guilt of the slayer, the young man loses his case through a mistrial. Then suddenly there appears upon the scene his old father, from whom he had separated in early youth, and with whom his relations had always been rather strained. Now the sentiment of family honor asserts itself.

The saga describes in a vivid manner the unexpected appearance at the Althing of a decrepit old man, poorly dressed in a black coat with only one sleeve, half concealing his head under a low-hanging hood, supporting his steps with a staff. Instinctively you realize that this man is crooked in all senses of the word. His name is Ofeig, and he is the true hero of the saga, which should have been named for him. He undertakes to prosecute the lawsuit for his son,

* English translation in *The Saga Library*, Vol. I, and in John Coles' *Summer Travelling in Iceland*.

and, chiefly by making free use of the latter's money, he wins his case. The whole procedure is manifestly corrupt, although it aims at justice. Yet you follow with a kind of amused admiration the sly old fox in his devious turns, you listen to his circuitous and cynical colloquies with judges and with members of the defendant's party, and lastly you feel a real satisfaction when you see his success in setting the allies at odds with each other, goading them into divulging the scurviest secrets about themselves.

Certainly there is a goodly portion of irony in this saga, comparable with that Eddic poem where all the gods are derided. One of the noble chieftains who stoops to receive a bribe is the grandson of the great Egil Skallagrimsson, and afterwards he is the most active in holding his fellow chieftains up to ridicule. You cannot avoid thinking that there is some social or party purpose behind all this, and, just as the saga about Ofeig treats events of a somewhat later time than most of the other sagas, it appears to be composed in the later period of saga-writing. It has a purpose outside of pure history.

All the family sagas have a basis in true history, and they seek to make you accept their whole contents as historical fact. But you have already noticed that in several instances I have had to call your attention to a difference of attitude between earlier and later sagas. The actual events were given by tradition and not to be changed arbitrarily, but the task of the saga-teller or saga-composer was to knit them together and explain them in a way that made them interesting to the audience, and in this task the changing spirit of the age will show its influence.

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You may naturally suspect that the distance from the events would tend to make the later sagas less reliable than earlier ones, but in this respect the difference between the second and the first half of the thirteenth century is not so immense that it would essentially impair the survival of tradition. The effect of the time appears rather in the treatment than in the weakening of tradition. We observe increasing influences of Christian ideas, we begin to discern more and more of the individual interests of authors. Above all, I think, we see that the historical interests, which were so strong in determining the first enterprise of writing sagas, are gradually weakening to give place to more exclusively artistic inclinations. The family saga manifests a definite tendency to depart from history and approach the pure novel.

Nothing seems so characteristic of this movement as the appearance of new themes: beside honor and revenge, love enters upon the stage as one of the chief motives of drama.

Undoubtedly, in this development there were strong elements working from within, but at the same time foreign influences asserted themselves. In France and Germany the first decades of the thirteenth century were the great age of the romances of chivalry, where love or rivalry for the favor of women played a prominent part. In the oldest Icelandic sagas love and women are almost completely absent, but they gradually gain a place in this literature too, and we meet with sagas which are real love stories.

Perhaps the earliest of them is the little novel

about Gunnlaug the Worm-tongue and Helga the Fair.* Here the only subject is the fight over the woman, and the whole story is exalted into the atmosphere of romance and pure passion. Even before her birth the fate of Helga as the object of men's love is foreshadowed by a dream of truly poetic beauty. Her father, who is no other than the son of Egil Skallagrímsson, dreams of having in his house a beautiful swan; two eagles come to fight over this swan, and both of them are killed. The dream is interpreted to him as signifying that a daughter is to be born to him and is to cause the death of two prominent men. He feigns incredulity, but nevertheless he orders that if his wife gives birth to a girl, she is to be exposed. This is a variation of a theme very popular in ancient tradition, that of trying to evade fate by exposing the child of ill omen, but, of course, the tragedy proves inevitable. When the daughter is born, she is so fair that the mother cannot find it in her heart to let her die, and secretly the child is sent to be reared by the brother-in-law of her father, the celebrated hero of another saga, Olaf Peacock. Here the father sees her when she is eight years old, and he is so impressed by her beauty that he takes her with him to his house.

Now the story develops very quickly. A few years later, young Gunnlaug comes to live in the same house. He is the son of another local chieftain in that part of the country, and you comprehend his passionate character by the fact that he leaves his father because his request to go abroad at the age of twelve is refused. It follows as a matter of course

*Translated into English in *Three Northern Love Stories*, by Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris.

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that the two children fall in love with each other, and Gunnlaug even manages to have a betrothal arranged between them, disguised as a game. At last, at the age of eighteen, he finds an opportunity of going abroad, and, before he leaves, Helga's father promises that she shall wait for him three years. Such a term is exactly that of common tradition.

The saga tells rather briefly about the exploits of Gunnlaug in foreign countries, so neglecting a favorite theme of other sagas. We are told that he is a poet, though only a few lines of his verse are quoted, and he goes to present laudatory poems to almost all the sovereigns of the North, whether they understand the Norse language or not, the kings of England and Ireland, the earls of the Orkney islands and of Swedish Gautland, the king of Sweden. Everywhere he receives great honor, and in England he is asked to stay to assist the king in his wars. Thus four years pass before he can return to Iceland.

In the meantime another Icelandic poet, whom he has outrivalled in Sweden, has come back to the home country, and when the waiting term of three years is over, he proposes for the hand of Helga the Fair in marriage. The father wants to give Gunnlaug another chance and postpones his answer for a year, but when Gunnlaug does not appear even in the fourth summer, the father has to give way, and the wedding of Helga with the second suitor is fixed for the first day of the next winter, with the specific condition that if Gunnlaug should arrive before that date, the agreement shall be null and void.

In spite of many delays and difficulties, pictured in detail by the saga, Gunnlaug reaches Iceland by the last ship of the summer, a fortnight before the wed-

ding, but he makes his landing in quite the opposite part of the country, and there he has the bad luck of having one foot put out of joint. Nevertheless he rides off, and he arrives at his home the very night the wedding is celebrated in the home of Helga. That is the tragic coincidence demanded by drama.

When, shortly after the wedding, Helga hears the news of Gunnlaug's arrival, she considers herself defrauded, and she refuses to live with her husband. Gunnlaug then challenges him to a legal duel; but to prevent this the Althing passes a law which abolishes duelling. The two rivals, however, are resolved upon having the matter decided; they go to Norway to fight their duel. According to the saga it is the last legal duel fought in Norway. In the fight Gunnlaug vanquishes his antagonist, and the rival, severely wounded, asks for some water. Gunnlaug brings it to him in his helmet, having been assured that the other will not play false with him; but at the moment the wounded man is handed the water, he hews at Gunnlaug's head with his sword. "I could not," he says, "bear the thought of your enjoying the love of Helga." The result is that they both lose their lives. The tragedy is complete.

In the whole of this story it is easy to perceive all the dramatic and romantic elements put in by the author. On the other hand, it has retained the pure saga style of direct and straightforward narration, it does not decorate the tale with superfluous descriptions or rhetoric, it gives a consistent though simple psychology.

You are carried into a world of exaggeration and mannerism when from this story you pass to the great and elaborate Saga of the Laxdalers, one of the most

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famous family sagas of Iceland and, in some respects, a most brilliant piece of art.* This is really a family saga, telling the story of the leading family of Laxdal through several generations. It has a very large gallery of persons, giving us the ancestors and family of them all, and it has even a kind of historical setting, although it may be said that the chronology is confused and other pretended facts are rather untrustworthy.

The style of the saga, however, betrays the influence of a new taste. It typifies and magnifies its characters in the very manner of foreign romances of chivalry. I think it is safe to say that no other work of Icelandic literature squanders so many superlatives as does this saga. Every man appearing is the strongest or the most puissant, the greatest sportsman or warrior, the handsomest or the most finely dressed, in some way or other the most excellent man of his kind, if not in the whole Norse world, at least in Iceland or in his part of Iceland. The women of the saga are the most beautiful, the most high-minded, or the cleverest you can imagine. You feel transferred to another world than Icelandic society when you hear about the behavior of these people or listen to their speeches. There is no limit to their wealth and their extravagance, and all their doings are on a grand scale. They do not speak in short and compact sentences like the people of the earlier sagas; long rhetorical speeches characterize their discourse. All this is a result of their polished manners; there is a chivalry and a courtliness about them, at least in their words, if not always

* Translated into English in three separate editions. See Bibliography.

in their acts, and indeed, the foreign word "courtesy," is repeatedly used for characterization. One cannot be mistaken about the origin of this whole style, and no doubt the tradition underlying the story has been remodelled by a man of literary education to suit the fashion of a later age.

The saga begins by telling the romance of the birth of Olaf Peacock. His father Hoskuld, the son of one of the most distinguished settlers in Iceland, bought on a visit to Norway, at a price three times the normal one, a female slave who was exceptionally beautiful, but who had the blemish of being dumb. Later it was discovered that she only feigned this disability. She was actually the daughter of the king of Ireland. Now she had to follow Hoskuld to Iceland, and there she had a son who was named Olaf, a wonderful child. When he grew up he was surnamed Peacock because of his fondness for show. He visited his grandfather in Ireland and was offered the kingdom there, but refused and returned to Iceland. His father loved him better than he did his legitimate sons, he gave him a share in his inheritance, and, of course, Olaf distinguished himself above all other men. By his courtesy and beauty he won the love of the daughter of Egil Skallagrimsson, and married her, though, before knowing him, she had repudiated the idea of marrying the son of a bondwoman.

Many tales are told of Olaf's magnificence, but the real hero of the saga is his son Kjartan, named after his Irish ancestor. He was the most beautiful man ever born in Iceland; his eyes were the finest a man ever had, his hair was silky and curled, and besides he was just as tall and strong as his grandfather, Egil,

more accomplished physically than anybody else, most perfect in all games of sport, and at the same time so kind that everybody loved him. Particularly, there was a warm friendship between him and his cousin Bolli, who was reared with him and who also had all sorts of excellent qualities, being second only to Kjartan himself.

In the neighborhood lived a young lady named Gudrun. She was the fairest woman in Iceland, and besides she was the proudest, the boldest and most energetic, and the most eloquent; she was so courteous in behavior that other women appeared like children compared with her. Her fate was predicted by a whole series of dreams, imitating and striving to outdo the dream foretelling the fate of Helga the Fair; but it must be said that both the dreams and the interpretation of them are much too artificial and too transparent to be really interesting, and they play no part in the development of the plot.

Gudrun was not quite inexperienced when Kjartan met her, she had already been twice married. Her first marriage was concluded against her wish, and, having fallen in love with another man, she succeeded in gaining a divorce. Then she married her lover, but he was lost at sea. Now Kjartan was seized by love for her, and it was generally agreed that there could not be a more suitable match than between these two. But Kjartan longed for adventure, and suddenly he resolved to make a journey abroad. Gudrun was a little hurt by his decision, taken without consulting her. She asked Kjartan to let her go with him, and, on this occasion, the saga makes her say the remarkable words, attesting to the new spirit reigning then: "I love not Iceland."

Kjartan refused her request, but instead asked her to wait for him three years. She was loath to give any promise, and so they parted.

Kjartan went to Norway, and here he distinguished himself in all respects; he even measured up to the most famous sportsman of all Norse history, King Olaf Tryggvason, and he might have married the King's sister, if he had wished. His bosom friend Bolli, who had accompanied him to Norway, took advantage of the rumor of such a marriage. He returned to Iceland before Kjartan, told Gudrun about the latter's intimacy with the Norwegian princess, and asked her hand in marriage. She intimated that even a princess would not be too high a match for Kjartan; but to the proposal of Bolli she answered nevertheless that she would marry no other man so long as Kjartan lived. When, however, her father insisted on her accepting Bolli as her husband, she finally yielded; by this time, to be sure, the three years set by Kjartan as a term for her waiting had passed.

The following year Kjartan returned, and learned about the marriage of Gudrun. He did not seem troubled by it, and, seeing one day that a young lady of his acquaintance was dressed in a fine garment which was a present from the sister of the King of Norway for his bride, he instantly sued for her hand in marriage. She too was a beautiful woman, the most beautiful in the northern part of Iceland.

Now Kjartan and Bolli lived near each other with their wives, but their old friendship cooled. The two families even adopted a hostile attitude, each seeking to insult the other, and the saga permits us to discern that Gudrun was the instigator of the one party

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to the quarrel, while Kjartan would not allow his wife to be disdained. Finally, affairs came to such a point that Gudrun egged her husband on to slaying Kjartan; she even threatened to leave him if he would not comply. The killing was accomplished, Kjartan having only two men at his back against nine aggressors. Bolli repented the act immediately and, in announcing it to Gudrun, called it a misfortune. Gudrun declared that it was not so, and said: "I think you enjoyed greater esteem before Kjartan returned to Iceland and kept you down, and last but not least, I am glad that tonight the wife of Kjartan will not go smiling to bed." Then Bolli answered angrily: "Apparently she does not turn more pale than you at these tidings, and I suspect that you would be less concerned if I were lying slain instead of Kjartan."

Kjartan's father, old Olaf Peacock, did not want the slaying of his son avenged on Bolli, who was his foster-son, and peace was made. But when Olaf died three years later, his widow, the proud daughter of Egil Skallagrímsson, egged her sons on to revenge, recalling to them the uncompromising bravery of her father. They did as she wished, and Bolli was killed in the very presence of Gudrun. She restrained her feelings; but when the son whom she bore soon after, and to whom she gave the name of his father, came to the age of twelve, he succeeded in avenging her husband.

So the saga goes on, falling into the style of the typical family sagas, telling of revenge following upon revenge, but this conclusion has not the grandeur or the artful construction which distinguished the preceding parts. With the death of Kjartan the

excitement of the love game of Gudrun is brought to a close.

She became an old woman, she married for the fourth time, and lost this husband too. At last she became a nun. In her old age, her son, the second Bolli, once asked her which man she had loved best of all. She answered by describing the particular qualities of all her husbands. But the son was not satisfied; he wanted to know about her own feelings. Then she answered: "I was worst to him I loved best."

These words of a classic pregnancy end and sum up the saga. Their compact sense is worthy of the true saga style. They contain a psychology that could not be given better, and modern authors, Ibsen and Bjornson, have taken them as the theme of profound dramatic conflict. But their basic idea is foreign to older sagas. The curiosity of the younger Bolli about secret sentiments would have shocked the feelings of preceding generations, and the answer extorted, the conclusion of the author, makes love between man and woman a far more dominating factor in life than saga-tellers could previously imagine. The older sagas have an outspoken virile character; the prominence of woman introduces a new element of poetry, but of sentimentality as well.

Nobody would assert that the ancient Norsemen had not always known the power of love. The old Eddic poems had their tragedies of love, and the poetic collection of wise sayings which I have already referred to, speaks of "the mighty lure of love." But in saga literature love is relatively late in coming to the fore, and when it appears, it is bound up with a definite tendency of a general character: starting

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from history, the saga becomes transformed more and more into a novel. Historical events and historical persons are still at the bottom of the stories, but nevertheless the interest of authors as well as of audience is steadily moving towards the romance of life and character, and fiction gains the ascendancy over history.

THE MASTER OF THE SAGA:
SNORRI STURLUSON

TWO sources of tradition were at the disposal of historical saga-writers in Iceland: traditions about family conflicts in the first century of the life of the commonwealth, and traditions about the kings of Norway. Parallel with the writing of family sagas ran the composition of works on Norwegian history. The Latin books that monks had begun to write about the kings who had established Christianity and the Church in Norway, King Olaf Tryggvason and Saint Olaf, were soon translated into the vernacular, and new sagas were written, particularly about Saint Olaf, the great hero of all Norse peoples.

The historical interest, which had begun to manifest itself through contemporary history, quickly expanded to cover different fields of the history of Norway. Somebody undertook to fill the gap between the Saga of Saint Olaf, concluding with his martyrdom in the year 1030, and the works of Eirik Oddsson and Abbot Karl, treating the history from 1130 and 1177 respectively. Other people wrote the saga of the earls of Thronðheim, the rivals of the kings before the times of Saint Olaf, and the saga of the Norwegian earls of the Orkney Islands, running beside and interwoven with the history of the kings during three centuries.

By such industrious work, continuing through the

first quarter of the thirteenth century, more and more material was gathered and put into writing, and, obviously, this accumulation of special sagas tended towards the composing of a complete history of Norway. The short summary written at the close of the twelfth century, perhaps at the instigation of King Sverri, could no longer be satisfactory. It had to be replaced by a work that made use of all the later researches and records.

Political development pointed in the same direction. The royal government established itself more firmly than it had been able to do before, unifying administration and law more and more, and from about 1225 the civil wars which had rent the nation for seventy years were practically at an end. At the king's court, where from about the same date regular records of administrative acts began to be kept, a natural desire must appear to see the historical foundation of the kingdom properly presented.

So, once again, Icelandic scholarship and literary art met the political need of the Norwegian government, and the combination resulted, towards 1230, in not merely one but two histories of the kings of Norway, written almost at the same time. It is worthy of note at once that both these works ended with the year 1177, at the appearance of King Sverri. As a matter of fact, the separate fragments of the history of Sverri had been put together about 1220 into a complete saga, certainly by an Icelander, whether in the royal service or not we do not know. So the history of the immediate past was taken care of, and the legitimacy of the new dynasty was established, as well as the scope of its policies.

The double work done for the earlier history was

a consequence of peculiar conditions prevailing in the government of Norway at that moment. From 1217, the reigning king was Hákon Hákonsson, the fourth king of that name, the grandson of King Sverri; but as he at that date was no more than a boy, the conduct of government was laid in the hands of a brother of the preceding king, by the name of Skuli, as earl of the country. Skuli, who with some right had expected to be acknowledged as the real king of Norway, could not be persuaded to lay down his power even after Hákon had come of age; he became the father-in-law of the young King, and he kept half of the country under his direct administration.

No doubt, Earl Skuli was a man of greater and bolder political views than King Hákon, who is described by a contemporary French historian as modest; and there are good reasons for asserting that it was at the court of Skuli that the idea first arose to have a complete history of Norway written, probably as early as 1220. Some few years later, when Hákon had had his own court organized, the idea was taken up here too, and it so happened that the work started here was finished before the work instigated by Skuli. This was the book which in modern times, from the appearance of the chief manuscript, has been called *Fagrskinna*, "The Fair-Skin Book," and we happen to know that when King Hákon, forty years later, was lying ill during a military expedition to Scotland, he had this book read aloud to him. Certainly, many good things may be said about it too; it is a very able work, but compared with the book that resulted from the initiative of Skuli, it comes off rather poorly. For this latter work

was the paramount performance of all Icelandic saga-writing, and fortunately we know the name of the author: he was Snorri Sturluson.

One might almost say that all the traditions and faculties developed in the Icelandic people through three centuries ran together in that one man. He could count among his ancestors many of the most distinguished men of the country; on the paternal side such a man as Snorri the Temple's Chief, the leading man in Iceland about the year 1000, on the maternal side the poet Egil Skallagrimsson. By his first marriage he happened to become master of the family estate of Egil, and lived there for some years, the very first years of the thirteenth century. Several scholars have even been tempted to guess at Snorri as the real author of Egil's Saga; but, in spite of some similarities, I think the reasons given are not strong enough to permit such a conclusion.

To be sure, being at that time not much more than twenty years of age, he had already begun his historical studies. From childhood he was fostered on an estate named Oddi, a center of learning in Iceland. There lived, half a century before, Saemund the Wise, one of the founders of historical research in the country, and the traditions from his time were kept alive. The foster-father of Snorri, the grandson of Saemund, one of the greatest chieftains in Iceland at the end of the twelfth century, was educated as a clergyman, but was a stout defender of lay power over the Church. He cultivated the national memories of his country, but was, at the same time, a bearer of traditions from Norway, being himself, through his mother, a grandson of one of the Norwegian kings.

Such were the intellectual environs of Snorri's youth, and, obviously he was gripped by the passion of the past. In his own mind he felt something strongly akin to the spirit of ancient, even of heathen, Iceland. When he grew up to become one of the chieftains of the country himself, he gave his house at the general Thing the name Valhall, after the residence of the great god Odin, and it is a peculiar coincidence that once, in the heat of fighting, his father was compared with Odin.

Iceland of the decades before and after the year 1200 might well recall the old heathen times. The country was filled with inner wars, great chieftains fighting each other in changing alliances, personal ambitions and greed determining all their acts. The father of Snorri was one of the foremost figures in those wars, and Snorri flung himself into the struggle for power. He had a violent appetite for life; he loved women, wealth, honor, and power. If injured, he craved revenge, and he was jealous of all his honors. He went into bloody feuds, even with his own brother, and undertook many lawsuits. But with all such passions, he had a broad human mind. We see him strangely changing his course of action on being moved by new impulses; he was, more than most people of his times, capable of nobler sentiments, even of pity. There was in him a large comprehension of other men, because opposite tendencies were fighting in his own soul. His was the mind of an artist, forming himself under the influence of men and conditions around him.

His first idea was to revive old poetry, and he wrote a whole text-book of poetics, his famous

Edda.* You would think that such a work must be rather tiresome reading; but, on the contrary, at least half of it is intrinsically entertaining. Seeing that the old poets were accustomed to take most of their poetical images from heathen mythology and hero legends, he sat down to give a survey of that whole field of tradition. As a matter of course, most of this tradition did not live any longer on the lips of the people, Christianity having rooted it out, and so Snorri performed an invaluable service to historical scholarship in gathering it in his book. But chiefly he founded his rendering upon old poems, and it is quite wonderful to observe how he was able to recast those poems into vivid saga-like narrative. There is a delight in story-telling which far surpasses the mere practical object of the work. On the other hand, there is a deep interest in scientific research which leads Snorri into speculations about the origin of heathen religion and myths, and though some of his theories are rooted in common medieval thought, others give evidence of a rationalism which takes one down to the eighteenth century. Standing in this regard independently outside of his subject, he has at the same time identified himself so intimately with it that he has succeeded in creating a real system of heathen Norse belief. Hence this work, which was probably composed when Snorri was a man of about thirty, reveals a mind of great power and independence.

From theory he passed to practice. It seemed to him a deplorable loss that the national art of royal poetry was perishing, and he undertook to rival the

* Several times translated into English, see Bibliography.

ancient poets, even to outdo them in their own field. He began by sending laudatory poems to the kings and other chieftains of Norway, and, after having visited Norway himself, he wrote his most ambitious poem in honor of the two men who recently had taken over the rule of the country, King Hákon and Earl Skuli. The remarkable thing about this poem is that, in a hundred verses, it represents as many metrical specimens, giving variations of the most complicated kinds. The author was duly proud of his work; he said himself at the end of the poem: "Where under the corners of heaven does any man know a poem of praise more excellently made?" And the reason of his pride was the elaborate, unique form of the poem: "Worthy of fame is the man who is able to make verses in all meters."

Those who look more for mastery of form than for true inner poetry—and such people there still are—may unreservedly admire this work of Snorri and think, like the ambitious author, that it will stand as long as mankind lives. Certainly, too, not a few of his verses may be relished in reading simply by reason of their magnificent euphony, without being understood. On the other hand, it is very seldom that one meets with poetic conceptions of deep individual character: the whole is a display of fireworks in versification, and it is only preserved to posterity because Snorri made it the basis of a metrical commentary as an addition to his Edda.

For two years (1218–20) Snorri stayed in Norway, mostly, as was natural, at the court of Earl Skuli; he saw much of the country, and he went on a trip to Sweden too. Presumably Skuli asked him to write a complete history of the kings of Norway, and

the next decade of his life was devoted to this work. This time he really wrote for eternity.

I think it may fairly be said that Snorri Sturluson is the foremost historian of the Middle Ages. In his own age you may find historians, for instance in France, who are able to tell about events and men in just as vivid and picturesque a way, but none who has such ability to construct a story into an inwardly connected unity. Others there are who may rival him in critical methods, though they rarely attain to his sureness of hand. Others again, undoubtedly, have a larger conception of general development, a firmer basis of historical philosophy; but they lack the art of constructing a good narrative. Snorri never presumes to play the philosopher, he does not argue about his facts, or at least only indirectly, but this does not mean that, in his presentment, facts and events stand there merely for their own sake. In reality he has his opinion about the determining forces in the progress of events that he tells about, and in the whole historical literature of the Middle Ages there is no author who has to such a degree the most precious gift of every historian, his unique power of psychological penetration and portrayal.

He began by writing a new Saga of Saint Olaf. With this work he went straight into the very center of Norwegian historical development. The reign of Saint Olaf meant the final consolidation of Norway as a united kingdom, the restoration of national independence, the organization of a national Church, and, finally, the erection of the ideals of royal power for the future. Selecting this epoch as his particular topic, Snorri was very well aware that it had to be conceived as a link in a far more comprehensive de-

velopment. Therefore he gave, as an introduction, a brief survey of the history of the kingdom during the century and a half preceding, and, what was still more characteristic of his purpose, he inserted in the very history of Saint Olaf a series of speeches which presented in condensed form his view of the chief phases of previous events.

So we see him preparing for a complete history of Norway, and after having finished the Olaf's Saga, he performed the new task as well, writing a more detailed account of earlier history, going back even to prehistoric times, and adding the history of the kings from the death of Saint Olaf until the accession of King Sverri. It is this work which has become famous under the title of *Heimskringla* or "The World's Circle," so named from the first words of the opening sentence of the book: "The world's circle, which mankind inhabit, is much cut by the sea." Snorri himself called it "Sagas about the Kings of Norway." The Olaf's Saga still remained the central part of the book, the account of that short reign taking about a third of the whole work, but in spirit as well as in outward limits, it really is the full history of Norway down to the year 1177.*

If one proceeds to analyze this work, starting from the preface of the author, one notices immediately that his idea is to write a history on the basis of truly scientific research. He is interested in prehistory; he tries to extract historical knowledge out of mythical legends, he has made his personal observations regarding tumuli from heathen times, and he even hazards a theory about the chronology of prehistoric burial customs. But what he has partic-

* For English translations, see Bibliography.

ularly at heart is to assure the reliability of his historical narrative. On the one hand, he makes for this purpose an examination of the transmission of oral tradition down to Ari the Wise, who wrote just a hundred years before Snorri, thus attempting to show that there was every reason to put confidence in the statements of Ari, founded as they were upon first class sources. On the other hand, Snorri has had recourse to old poems. He admits frankly that he cannot test the truth of mythical poems, but the poems made in honor of the kings and recited in their presence, these he regards as his best sources. He is well aware that they are composed for laudatory ends but he feels sure that nobody would dare tell manifest lies before the king and his court, and so they will have to be accepted as far as they go, reserving the presumption that they do not give the whole truth.

This is an admirable presentment of critical principles, formulated in an absolutely modern spirit. You may survey all medieval literature, and even a large field of modern historiography, without finding a like instance of methodical thinking. Snorri does not rely on the primary sources of a modern historian, the contemporary legal and State documents, naturally enough, because he is writing about an age when almost no such documents existed. But he expressly prefers contemporary sources to later ones, and he knows even the method of tracing the origin of literary records or oral report. It was not an individual discovery on his part to see the usefulness of old poetry as historical evidence. Icelandic sagawriters were already accustomed to quote verses in support of their narrative, but Snorri made a broad

and elaborate system out of this more casual habit. Nobody knew the old poetry so intimately and so exhaustively as he did, and he made it the very basis of his whole work. You may disagree with him in his conclusions, but you cannot refuse him your acknowledgment of his firm handling of the sources that were available to him.

The same firm hand is evident in his way of constructing and rendering the course of events in his narrative. It goes almost without saying that his style of narration is an inheritance from the established saga style; but here it reaches a rare degree of perfection. In this work you cannot point out a loose or vague sentence, one that has not a clear meaning or does not convey a precise idea, one that is not there for a purpose, as a link fitting in with the whole scheme. At the same time, the style has a moderation and dignity worthy of a true historian, without losing its fullness and energy. Living images are always rising before you, and you are made an eye-witness of the scenes described.

Moreover, Snorri has introduced in his work the dramatic construction of the family saga. There are many dramatic episodes in his history, and we cannot always state that they are products of his own art; his sources are not completely known to us. There is, however, one prominent instance where we are able to compare his version with his sources, and where we can observe how he constructed a drama of great historical impressiveness.

It occurs in the Saga of Saint Olaf. Here the problem was to explain why the great chieftains of the country rebelled against the king. Older sagas, starting from a more purely ecclesiastical view, simply

state that the opposition to him originated in the natural resistance to Christianity and justice. Snorri looked for the political reasons of rebellion, and he found in his sources some disconnected notices which he could use for illuminating the course of events that led up to the great crisis.

He found mentioned as the leading enemies of the King the chieftains Erling Skjalgsson of southwestern Norway and Thori Hund of northern Norway. It was told that Thori Hund had slain one of the King's men in an expedition to the White Sea; but for this crime a peaceful settlement was arranged. Later the King, suspecting treachery, caused a nephew of Thori to be slain, and then Thori took revenge by killing three of the King's men, whereupon he had to flee north to Finnmark. As an instance of the opposition of Erling Skjalgsson, there was told a story of his nephew Asbjorn from northern Norway. In spite of royal interdiction, Erling sold a load of grain from his estate for the assistance of Asbjorn; but one of the King's officials seized all the grain. Asbjorn avenged himself by killing this official in the very presence of the King. He was arrested and condemned to be executed. But before this could be done, his friends succeeded in procuring the intervention of Erling with a whole army, and the King was forced to compromise.

It is worth while to notice that the author of *Fagrskinna* did not think this story about Asbjorn of such importance that it should even be mentioned in a real history of Saint Olaf. Snorri, on the contrary, made this tale the turning point in the King's history and combined with it the rise of enmity among all the great chieftains, illustrating in this way the pro-

found contrast between the policies of the King and the interests of the magnates.

He placed the story just where it would produce the greatest effect, having given an exact account of how the King had succeeded in making the great local chieftains, one by one, acknowledge his royal power. He had finished by telling how Erling Skjalgsson, as the last of all, had made his compromise with the King, so that they now were reconciled to outward appearance. Then, suddenly, he begins the story about the young man Asbjorn, he gives us a picture of his ambitious character and shows us the reasons why he has to buy grain. Further, we are allowed to accompany Asbjorn on his voyage to the south, where, first, he tries to buy from one of the officials of the King, but, turned off here, proceeds to his uncle Erling, who invents a legal trick to elude the interdiction against selling. But as he sails northward again, the same royal official stops him and takes the grain away from him.

The whole story opens quietly, but advances from step to step in such a way that you comprehend instinctively that some great conflict is preparing. Nor do the consequences fail to appear. Asbjorn could not bear his disgrace. The next spring he again sailed to the south, he arrived at the farm where the royal official was residing, he found the King himself at the farm, he listened to the man telling derisively about his disposal of Asbjorn, and then he leaped forward and cut off his head. Instantly he was seized, and the King ordered him executed. By several tricks the execution was postponed, and meanwhile Erling was informed about the incident. He gathered his forces and arrived in time, before the execution. The

meeting between the King and Erling is one of the greatest scenes of the whole saga; you feel two powerful wills set against each other. A compromise is made, but you cannot doubt that an enduring peace is impossible.

Asbjorn returns after having promised to enter the service of the King in the place of the slain man, but coming home, he meets the brother of his father, Thori Hund. Here Snorri twines the threads of his drama with great art. He makes Thori persuade Asbjorn to break his ignominious promise. King Olaf sends one of his men north, and he succeeds in killing Asbjorn. The spear that was used in this killing is given by the mother of Asbjorn to his uncle Thori, who, in this way, quite in the style of the Icelandic sagas, is charged with the duty of revenge. Then follows the extremely interesting and exciting story about the expedition of Thori to the White Sea, in which he achieves his revenge, killing with the same spear one of the men who had assisted in slaying Asbjorn, and who is, at the same time, one of his rivals in the contest for power in his part of the country.

So we see how this story of Asbjorn has been made the occasion of enmity between the King and two of the foremost chieftains of the country. It is no more an isolated case, a mere instance of existing conditions. It is the deciding impulse which gives the whole development the fatal turn, and after that one cog engages the other, until there is no more stopping. The drama works itself out to the end.

No doubt, the Saga of Saint Olaf is Snorri's masterpiece. He found before him a disordered collection of facts and legends, and he put them in march-

ing line. First of all, he created a chronological system for the history of King Olaf, referring every single event of his reign to a fixed year, and presenting all his movements and enterprises in annalistic order. This chronology is so masterly a construction that you will have to accept it as a whole or reject it completely; it is not possible to take away a single stone without unsettling the whole edifice.

But the methodical arrangement of events inside the circuits of Olaf's accession and death was not to Snorri the final aim of his task. In truth, it was only a means to attain a far higher aim, the comprehension of the motive forces in the King's career and of the evolution of his character. Snorri transferred to the history of the Norwegian kings the psychological insight of the Icelandic family sagas. To the older authors of sagas about Saint Olaf, he was simply the man who fought untiringly for the cause of Christianity and justice. Snorri realized the psychological problem of the man who, starting as a viking, became the organizer of a State and a Church, and ended as a saint.

The solving of this problem was the more difficult to Snorri because he had to build upon the false information that Olaf had been christened in childhood, the truth being that he accepted baptism during a stay at the court of the Duke of Normandy and from that time abandoned his viking life. Neither could Snorri, or anybody else in those days, have so broad a view of social and intellectual movements of the times as to be able to appreciate the underlying influences at the Norman court which were able to convert the young viking to a new way of thinking.

Snorri had to content himself with showing Olaf as much as possible allied with Christian kings, and with making memories of home awaken in his mind, urging him on to conquer the kingdom of his ancestors.

The most outstanding performance of Snorri, however, was the analysis of the development of the King's character in the course of his reign in Norway. We see Olaf, as a youth of twenty years, setting out to conquer the kingdom, bearing before him two ideal claims: he demands his rights as an heir of the former kings, and he proposes to throw off foreign dominion. After his victory he begins immediately to consolidate the royal power, amending the laws and organizing the Church. Through long negotiations he succeeds in making peace with the king of Sweden, in this case evincing a patience and a conciliatory spirit formerly not to be found in his character. But when fighting for true Christianity, he knew no indulgence and spared no opponents. It was a principle of all his acts as ruler of the realm that great and small men should have the same even-handed justice; but the ancient chieftains of the country could not and would not bear a dominion of such a kind, they resented the restriction of their power by the King, and they rebelled. In several of these conflicts the King proved so relentless that he actually sharpened the opposition and roused the desire of revenge. It appears manifest that King Olaf was tempted to expand his power beyond the natural limits. Thus, after having brought the Orkney Islands under his sway, he made an attempt to win a foothold even in Iceland, but was repulsed. Finally,

the chieftains at home allied themselves with King Canute the Great of Denmark and England, and then Olaf was obliged to flee the country.

Now, and only now, Snorri begins to prepare the transformation of Olaf into a saint. In exile the mind of the King passes through a process of purification, and he becomes at last the humble servant of God. Extremely characteristic in this connection is the use Snorri makes of a legendary story about Saint Olaf. In one of the older Olaf sagas he found a story about how the King happened on a Sunday to be whittling chips, and on being reminded of his breach of holiday rules, punished himself by burning the chips in his hand; but, the old saga adds, the hand was not harmed by the burning. The purpose of this story was to show the holiness of the King. Snorri transferred it to Olaf's life in exile, and then he cut away the final sentence about the miracle. So the story became simply a witness of the new humility of the King.

From his exile we follow the King on his homeward journey, with the purpose of reconquering his kingdom. But this time he comes not as a man who claims anything for himself; he is the servant of God, and he is a mild man, anxious to do good. In such a mood he loses his life, and then he rises a saint.

Again we have to state that the whole construction of Snorri regarding the mental development of Saint Olaf is so masterly a unit that one will have to accept or reject the whole of it; one cannot take away some details and leave the rest; everything is fitted into a system of psychological analysis, and there it has to stand, if the whole is not to fall.

The Saga of Saint Olaf is eminently a biography in the style of the Icelandic family sagas; it has their dramatic and psychological unity, everything centers in the hero. So are all the other kings' sagas which, together, constitute Snorri's work, and in many of them we find psychological studies of the highest interest. But in one important regard Snorri—and he alone among the old historians of Norway—goes beyond this biographical point of view: he knows the art of connecting all the particular royal biographies by an inner tie.

I have already pointed out the central position of the Saga of Saint Olaf; both the preceding and the following sagas are illuminated by general and specific observations there presented. At the same time we notice that in every single saga the appearance of the hero of the following saga is prepared, often so that we perceive the part he will have to play; and the character studies of the kings, in all their variety, show that Snorri had a definite idea of some general types belonging to the royal family by inheritance. Here again we have certainly to observe the influence of the Icelandic saga. Particularly interesting is the pointed comparison made by Snorri of the two half-brothers Saint Olaf and Harold Hardrádi, culminating in the conclusion that no two men were more alike in character, although King Harold was regarded as a tyrant, Olaf as a saint.

The strongest inner tie, however, combining the consecutive parts of Snorri's work into a real unity, is his conception of the historical forces working through all the three centuries he is telling about. To be sure, he never generalizes on his own account; he makes his characters display their own designs.

But you cannot avoid feeling the continuity of ideas, and you may not doubt that Snorri was fully conscious of the scheme of his work.

You easily see, then, that, starting from a seemingly simple point of view, he arrives at far-reaching conclusions. In his opinion the kings are the bearers of the whole history of Norway, and their task is a twofold one: they establish and defend the existence of the kingdom as an independent nation, and they organize the State and the Church of Norway under royal power. Both in regard to national independence and, still more, in regard to the organization of government, the kings are put in opposition to powerful interests—those of the nobility of the country, represented by the families of the great local chieftains. The fight between king and noblemen becomes, according to Snorri, the vital problem of the history of Norway. He states the policies of the kings already at the founding of their national power, using about Harold Fairhair, the first king of Norway, just the same words as later about Saint Olaf, saying that he treated great and small men in the same manner. Such principles of government naturally provoked the opposition of the great men, the nobility, and from that time on the social and political struggle continued. There might be weak kings who bowed to the power of the chieftains; but ever and again kings arose who lifted high the true royal program, sometimes defeated, sometimes victorious.

It is worth while to remark that in this whole historical conception there is not a semblance of a democratic view. Snorri, himself a powerful chieftain,

looks with contempt upon the common people and their political abilities. He conceives the struggle as one between a king, representing large national ideas, and local chieftains of limited egoistic views, and he sees the two opposing parties drawing more and more closely together towards the great crisis of the struggle, which came in his own times with the appearance of King Sverri.

At this point we become suddenly aware of the intellectual connection between the origin of Sverri's Saga and the historical conception of Snorri Sturluson. Looking back to preceding and contemporary works on the history of Norway, we find that Snorri is not the originator of the idea of the opposition between king and nobility. The idea simply belongs to the age, it is a natural outcome of contemporary struggles, but nobody else has made such a consistent system of the idea as Snorri did, constructing, as it were, the whole history of the kings from this point of view.

His conception has dominated all nineteenth century historiography in Norway. Personally I think it is essentially false; in my opinion, the royal power, uniting the whole of Norway, was established from the beginning through a union of the aristocracy of the country, and only little by little did it develop into an independent power, coming into conflict with this aristocracy, attempting to establish a royal nobility in its own service. But here you observe the greatness of Snorri at its highest effect. He has worked out his historical system with such mental power and such exquisite art that it has imposed itself upon all later generations of historians. He

has written the lives of the kings in so masterful a way that you are immediately convinced of the truth. It needs an effort to break loose from his grip on you.

Snorri is not only the greatest artist of medieval historians, he is the magician of history.

HISTORICAL VALUE OF THE SAGAS

WHEN the old sagas, committed to writing in the thirteenth century, were first brought into the light of history, from the close of the seventeenth century on, historians of that day were so charmed by all the fascinating information about ancient times contained in the recovered manuscripts that they were inclined to accept every word of them as unimpeachable truth. Even mythical sagas were ranged among historical sources, and historians sat down to calculate the generations of kings and heroes appearing there, so that finally they succeeded in constructing a Scandinavian history provided with a complete series of kings, going back even to the times of Christ.

Later studies and researches have mercilessly destroyed this fanciful construction, and even historical sagas have not escaped the purgatory of criticism. They have been tested upon their distance from the events, their literary origin and basis of tradition, their harmony with other sources, their inherent tendencies, and their will to veracity, with the result that scholars have been forced to discover in them an increasing quantity of mistakes and misinformation, so that now you will have to regard them with the utmost skepticism.

Before proceeding to a more detailed inquiry as to the value of the sagas as historical sources, I

should like to lay stress upon another side of the question, namely, their value as an expression of intellectual life in the age of their coming into existence. Whatever may be their fate as sources of information in regard to ancient times, they cannot fail to remain for ever the most splendid monuments of the civilization that reigned in Norway and, above all, in Iceland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The sagas represent artistic and scholarly interests and qualities which easily make their home in this age one of the most attractive centers of historical study, and render Iceland a classic soil of literature.

The basis of this literature was an unusually vigorous oral tradition, continuing through centuries; and as a matter of course Norse tradition was dominated by the same forces which manifest themselves in all oral transmission of tales from generation to generation. When the tradition has reached a fixed literary form, for instance by versification, there is at least a possibility that it can survive unaltered through a relatively long period of oral existence. We have just such clear evidence of conservative vitality in the Old Norse poetry which was kept in memory for even more than three centuries without being written down. But prose tales are ever exposed to the risk, or the good fortune, of being changed by reproduction from new lips, and in this way their value as purely historical sources is constantly being impaired.

The Icelandic saga-men might differ widely as to memory or conscientiousness; but they all had to think of the effect of their tales upon the audience. That is the reason for the dramatic construction of

so many sagas. Such construction makes for the greatness of saga literature in regard to art, but it does not further historical reliability. With the tendency to dramatizing, not only may the whole connection of events be misrepresented, but a great many details may be changed, cut away, or added. Experience may have taught the effectiveness of certain situations or phrases, and they may turn up in different sagas, precisely like certain types of verse in folk poetry.

It is, for instance, an exciting situation to have a man standing outside listening to his foe, who, before an audience in the house, is telling about the inferiority of the other man or one of his nearest relatives in their previous encounter. Hearing himself defamed, he has to rush in and cut off the head of the defamer in the midst of his tale, though he knows that his own life is thus given into the hands of his enemies. It is particularly dramatic when a man has accepted money for some treachery and then his wife, representing the upright character, strikes his mouth with the purse so that his teeth break. Or think of the mingling of fear and amusement that is roused by the tale of a self-reliant man who has committed a homicide, as yet unavenged: one day, in a crowd of people, he sits counting money for a bargain, and then, suddenly, the avenger appears and cuts off his head. "You heard the head saying 'ten' as it flew along." Scenes like these recur in more than one saga.

However, such direct repetitions are not numerous. The creative imagination of the saga-men was generally great enough to find ever new forms of excitement, but certain methods furnished approved

effects, as when some difficult task had to be achieved, and the difficulty was impressed on the audience by having the attempt repeated three times.

It is easily observed that the number three plays a prominent part in popular epic, and a German scholar has pointed out no less than six hundred instances of this number appearing in a total of thirty-two Icelandic family sagas. To be sure, the number three is not unknown in real life, and in justice to this scholar it must be said that he is not unaware of the fact. In some important cases, the Icelandic law itself imposed the number three, as by the institution of outlawry for three years and by the fine of three marks, but the regular repetition of an act three times is manifestly the result of a poetic tendency of tradition, and it is not limited to the family saga. In the Saga of Saint Olaf, for instance, we find that he had a conference on three consecutive days with the heathen chieftain of Gudbrandsdal before succeeding in overcoming his paganism, the whole tale about this meeting bearing all the signs of popular tradition. The fights between Earl Hákon and the Norwegian kings in the tenth century are distributed in periods of three years. And other instances might be given. In particular, when somebody is hidden and is to be found, it is a rule that the search for him has to be made three times, and the dramatic quality of this repetition is enhanced if, after each search, the pursuer realizes in which way he has been deceived.

Inherent in the nature of drama is the desire to concentrate all the interest on one single man, the hero of the drama, and all popular tradition tends in this direction. In truth, no tendency can be more nat-

ural to the human mind, and you will find it wherever human memory is busy with history. Judging from personal experiences at examinations, I should not regard it as an impossibility that some student who had read and assimilated a text-book of American history might happen to represent Abraham Lincoln as the initiator of the abolitionist movement in the thirties, or make him replace John Brown in the raid on Virginia in 1859, and lastly ascribe to him the leadership in reconstruction politics. Sitting in an examination committee, we would agree in condemning such distortion of facts as gross ignorance, but in fact such "ignorance" is identical with the mental process of simplification that goes on in oral tradition, in the forming of all hero tales, nay, even in scholarly history, where lesser characters and events must submit to neglect in favor of more important ones.

This tendency explains the biographical character of the Icelandic family sagas, and it is general in all sagas. It has been shown that in the earliest historiography of Normandy two leading vikings, Hastings and Rollo, have appropriated the exploits of quite a number of their fellows, and in all probability the viking hero of the sagas, Ragnar Lodbrok (Shaggy Breeks), has absorbed the lives and exploits of several men. When the sagas of Norwegian history are handed down as sagas of the kings, the reason is not merely that political history at that time was naturally concentrated in the kings; it is also because the individual king was a better object of memory and of narrative.

Before Norway was united into a single kingdom by war, there certainly had come into existence law

unions or commonwealths of a republican character, such as Iceland was later, but republics have no history, at least not in the age of oral tradition, and those old republics have vanished from memory. The law organizations created by them are ascribed by the sagas to particular kings, thus adding to their personal merits. Saint Olaf was by legend made the very founder of the legal system in Norway, and later tradition transferred to him the fights with trolls which the sagas tell about his predecessor of the same name.

Every person was seen in the saga from a certain point of view; he had to play his particular part in the story, and his character had to be represented accordingly. Very rarely do we have an opportunity of testing the character portraits depicted by the sagas; but I can give you at least one instance of the transformation that can befall an historical character.

The second king of Norway, Eirik Blood-Axe, who reigned a little before the middle of the tenth century, had a queen named Gunnhild. The earliest Latin chronicle of Norway tells us that she was the daughter of a Danish King Gorm and so the sister of his son and successor Harold Black-Tooth, the king who says of himself in a runic inscription that he was the man who won all Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christians. The correctness of the information that Queen Gunnhild of Norway was his sister is confirmed by the fact that her oldest son was named after her father; he was called Gorm.

Now the sagas tell quite a different story about this queen. They make her a malicious witch, and

they trace her origin to the people most skilled in magic, the Finns in northern Norway, with a typical fairy-tale account of how King Eirik found her there in the north. The sagas intimate plainly that she was the evil genius of her husband's reign, and, later, of that of their sons. Both Eirik and Gunnhild had to flee the country before the discontent of the people, and the youngest brother of Eirik, Hákon, the foster-son of King Athelstane of England, became king of Norway. But after Eirik's death Gunnhild and her sons sought to reconquer Norway, supported by King Harold Black-Tooth. We can very well understand the reasons for this support, as the sons of Gunnhild were really the nephews of the Danish king; but the sagas are ignorant of this fact and give no explanation at all. King Hákon defended his realm vigorously, but according to saga tradition he was at last killed by the witchcraft of Gunnhild, and her sons inherited the kingdom.

The Icelandic family sagas give us from this period of her life a picture of an amorous old woman, of course preferring Icelanders as her lovers, and using her witchcraft to prevent them from deceiving her. The Kings' Sagas continue to represent her as a most wicked-minded woman who incites her sons to kill off all local chieftains, their rivals; her instigation even leads them to burn such a rival in his own house. Finally, they grew so willful that they made themselves independent of the king of Denmark, and he caused the foremost of them to be tricked into going to Denmark, where he was killed. After that, the sagas tell us, Harold Black-Tooth sent for Queen Gunnhild, and in order to have her come to

Denmark, he proposed to marry her. She hurried to accept the King's invitation; but, on arriving, she was miserably and deservedly drowned in a swamp.

We now find it rather ludicrous that when, a hundred years ago, the corpse of a woman, presumably from this age of history, was found in a Danish swamp, historians there asserted that it must be the body of Queen Gunnhild, and even alleged they saw in her face an expression of suffering and disappointment. In this way they claimed to find the saga tradition of her death confirmed. Some decades later, a Norwegian historian discovered in Scotland the old chronicle which taught us the true parentage of Gunnhild, and so the whole story of her tragic end was exploded; no one could be made to believe that King Harold Black-Tooth had proposed for the hand of his own sister in marriage.

But what was the reason for this transformation of the character and history of the Queen? I think it is quite manifest that the saga tradition started from the fact that she was an enemy of the first king who made any attempt at introducing Christianity in Norway, King Hákon, the foster-son of Athelstane. The sagas favored this king, not only on account of his being a Christian (as a matter of fact, he was forced to give up all plans of christianizing his kingdom), but still more because of his struggle for national independence. Therefore they forgot, what we learn from contemporary sources, that the sons of Gunnhild really did more for Christianity than Hákon. Then there was a tradition that the sons of Gunnhild had slain the father of the hero king who finally made Norway Christian, Olaf Tryggvason, and the legend early duplicated these killings, making the

sons of Gunnhild slay not only the father of Olaf Tryggvason, but the grandfather of the younger hero of Christianity, Saint Olaf, as well. Not satisfied with this, the sagas traced the opposition of family lines still further back, making Eirik Blood-Axe kill the fathers of the men slain by his sons.

This story of enmity against the two great heroes of Christianity was most fateful to the conception of Queen Gunnhild. The legend about Olaf Tryggvason told the most pathetic tales about how he was persecuted in his childhood, and all his miseries and perils were laid at the door of Gunnhild. We even meet here the typical motive that her emissaries seek for the boy at three different places, fortunately always in vain. In the legend she came to play the part of the wicked stepmother, so well known from fairy tales, and as a consequence she had to assume the full character of such stepmothers, becoming a witch. Thus one thing brought about the other, and you see how far tradition might lead away from historical truth.

In Denmark, tradition took an opposite direction. There, King Olaf Tryggvason, the founder of the Christian Church of Norway, was transformed into a heathen and even a sorcerer; by virtue of his witchcraft he there received the surname of Crow-Bone. Such are the deviations of tradition, starting from one and the same historical fact.

More than two hundred years passed from the death of Queen Gunnhild to the final forming of tradition about her, but the effects of inherent tendencies of tradition might well be visible in a much shorter time, although not attaining such a complete

transformation. At the beginning of the twelfth century (1103-1130) there reigned in Norway a king by the name Sigurd, called the Crusader because as a young monarch (1108-1111) he made a crusade to Jerusalem. About this expedition the saga tradition was early able to tell a series of romantic and adventurous stories, referring to King Sigurd common crusaders' tales, and the journey to Jerusalem became the chief feat of the King, so much so that his whole character and career were judged from this point of view. From Sverri's Saga we know that half a century after Sigurd's death his fame as a blessed administrator of the kingdom was still living among the people of Norway, and there is preserved a little verse ascribed to him, stating that peace and farming labor were his ideals. But some decades later the dramatizing and typifying tendency of the saga had blotted out every reminiscence of this side of his character. Instead, he was contrasted with his brother Eystein who reigned together with him, but who had stayed at home, and the contrast was concentrated in the famous dramatic contest of the two brothers, Eystein telling about his peaceable achievements, Sigurd emphasizing his military feats. At that time he had become almost nothing but a warrior king, a conception very far from the truth.

Even when the essentials of events and characters are preserved, the oral tradition may transform their historical setting. There is plenty of evidence from modern times showing how fairy tales from the Orient may make themselves at home in European countries and assume there an absolutely national character; the core of the tale is retained, while all the adjuncts are transformed to accord with the new

surroundings. In the same way, historical traditions may keep, as it were, up to date. Egil's Saga, for instance, refers to Norway in the first half of the tenth century court rules which appear to be reconstructed from much later Icelandic conditions. Several family sagas introduce a horse fight as one of the dramatic elements of their story, although such fights do not seem to have come into fashion in Iceland earlier than the twelfth century. The Saga of King Magnus Bare-Legs (1093-1103) makes him use the armorial bearings that were adopted by King Sverri almost a century later. Very often the sagas make their heroes wear clothes from the south which could not have reached Iceland or Norway at so early a time.

The admittance of such anachronisms has in one respect an important bearing. No doubt the saga-tellers and saga-writers were influenced, not merely by the material environment of their own age, but by the intellectual atmosphere as well. Unconsciously they conceived the events of the past in the spirit of the present. For instance: when, influenced by the contemporary struggles between king and nobility, they looked upon the earlier political development of Norway as determined by the same opposition, we are not obliged to accept this tradition as founded on historical facts, and, in truth, I think the facts are apt to reverse such a conception. But then it has to be added that a great many of these facts are to be found in the sagas themselves, thus really attesting to their genuine historical value.

It cannot be denied that the sagas contain a great many historical facts. It may often be difficult, sometimes impossible, to cut through the web of tradition

and ascertain the facts behind. When you read that the first king of Norway, Harold Fairhair, took the ownership of land away from all the farmers of the country, and you then see all the desperate attempts of modern historians to find some reasonable explanation of this story, you may fairly doubt whether it has any foundation in fact; perhaps it is merely a product of the general notion of the Icelandic sagas that Harold Fairhair was a tyrant. But the nearer you come to the date of the writing of the sagas the greater the chance of uncorrupted tradition. Of course, contemporary sagas offer the greatest quantity of reliable facts, and even as to the earliest times dealt with in the sagas the number of facts given by them is quite surprising.

As an instance I refer you to the Saga of Eirik the Red and his son Leif, the two discoverers of America.* The father discovered Greenland in the 980s, and as to the truth of this fact no dispute is possible, because from that time the Icelanders maintained a settlement in Greenland, holding their own there for five centuries. More doubt has been expressed regarding the discovery of the American continent by Leif Eiriksson about the year 1000, and obviously the story of his adventures, and still more those of his successors in the Wineland expeditions, is full of traditions of a fairy-tale character, some of them borrowed from foreign fables. Yet such things do not really impair the trustworthiness of the fact itself, and fortunately we are in a position to prove that the discovery of the land which Leif honored with the name of Wineland, just as his father had given the flattering name of Greenland to a much less attractive country,

* Several English translations.

was a well-known fact, even outside Iceland, a long time before the saga was written. A German chronicler, Adam of Bremen, who wrote about the Northern countries approximately in the year 1075, notes that the Danish king told him that far away in the ocean was an island named Wineland because grapevines grew there. Fifty years later the learned Ari the Wise mentions the expeditions to Greenland and Wineland, expressly adding that his information was derived from his uncle who had talked with one of the companions of Eirik the Red. So the main content of the saga is well certified. Opinions have diverged widely as to the determination of the exact place of the landfall of Leif Eiriksson and the other Icelanders. Much of the difficulty may depend on our own ignorance regarding the correct interpretation of the astronomical observations given by the saga, and the possibility is near to hand that many details have been corrupted in the course of tradition, but the essential fact of the discovery stands unimpeachable.

The transformation or the overgrowth of tradition, though on the whole following certain tendencies, may work out rather differently in single cases, and I think it would be absolutely vain to try to set up definite rules for the separation of historical facts from traditional fiction. On the whole, we should be inclined to accept the naked fact, for instance, of the killing of a man, without giving too much credence to the circumstances said to lead up to the killing. The reasons for events may be largely the outcome of the speculation or dramatizing activity of tradition or some author in the stage of fixing tradition, and we who live now have the same right as the saga-men to

speculate about reasons. In some cases and in some respects we may be better equipped to find out the truth than the authors of the sagas; we may have in our hands some contemporary evidence, and in general we are not affected by the temptation to dramatic effect. On the other hand, we must acknowledge our shortcomings resulting from the long distance that separates us from the events, from the play of institutions and the whole mentality of the saga age.

It is a general habit of the Icelandic sagas to impress upon us the reasons for acts or events by means of dialogues or speeches. We may imagine, and there are analogies from modern tradition attesting the fact, that striking speeches can be preserved through a long period of oral tradition. It happens that we find in one of the Icelandic sagas a quotation which has been kept in memory even without being understood. In the *Saga of Burnt Njál*, written at the close of the thirteenth century, it is told that, in a fight in the very court of Iceland, the Althing, shortly after the year 1000, the chieftain Flosi and his band are making for a stronghold in the Great Rift above the court plain, but they are prevented from reaching their goal by Snorri the Temple's Chief, who has assembled his men at the entrance. Then Flosi calls out: "Whose fault is it that we cannot get to the stronghold in the Great Rift?" Snorri answers: "It is not my fault, but I can tell you whose fault it is; it is that of Thorvald Crisp-Beard and Kol." By way of explanation the saga adds: "They were both then dead, but they had been the worst men in all Flosi's band." But this explanation is totally wrong. From the writings of Ari the Wise we know perfectly well

that the two men mentioned were actually involuntary benefactors of the Althing, the site of the assembly having been the property of Thorvald (or rather his grandfather Thori) Crisp-Beard, appropriated because he had killed there a serf named Kol. In this case, then, a speech has lived in memory for almost three hundred years, although its meaning has been completely forgotten.

But from such a case we dare not conclude that, in general, the speeches of the sagas represent old tradition. From modern times we know a number of "historical words" that are fabricated after events, and so certainly are many of the pregnant phrases preserved by the sagas. From the most celebrated battle of Norse history, that in which the hero king of Norway, Olaf Tryggvason, lost his life, in the year 1000, there is reported one of the most famous speeches of Norse history. King Olaf had in his ship a renowned young archer, Einar the Bow-Shaker, who aimed at the leader of the enemy, but just at that moment had his bow broken by an arrow from the other side. The King, hearing the break, exclaimed: "What broke so loudly?" Einar answered: "Norway out of your hands, my King!" The King threw his own bow to him, asking him to use that instead. Einar tried the bow, straining the string, but flung it away, saying: "Too weak, too weak is the King's bow." Now we should think it very unlikely that the breaking of a bow could be audible through the noise of a great battle, and the whole conversation becomes doubly suspicious when we notice that, in another saga, it is reported from quite another battle, Einar there fighting in the service of the same

chieftain whom he was aiming at in the former fight. Certainly, here we are concerned with an "historical speech" of later invention.

We easily cut away from true history all the conversations reported from secret meetings of two particular men. They are indeed very numerous both in the family sagas and in the Kings' Sagas, and evidently they do not pretend to be anything but the dramatized ideas of tradition as to the motives of acts. Often we must assume that the very authors of the written sagas imitate tradition in constructing that kind of conversation. It is characteristic of the power of this literary habit that we find it in use not only in regard to ancient events, but for contemporary events as well. So, when the two political and ecclesiastical masters of Norway, Earl Erling Wry-Neck and Archbishop Eystein, in the year 1163, made their agreement as to the relationship between king and Church, Snorri Sturluson gives the account of their negotiations in the form of a secret conversation between the two men. Strangely enough, many modern historians have accepted such conversations as strictly historical, and, still more strangely, some of them have relied upon the historicity of the account when Snorri pretends to record even the unspoken thoughts of his hero Saint Olaf. So forcibly may the sagas tell such things that we have to remind ourselves of the circumstances in order not to take them for granted.

Clearly, there are differences between the individual authors; some of them give evidence of far more serious research and stronger powers of criticism than many others. Sometimes, however, it is very difficult to decide whether, in a given case, the

saga reproduces real tradition or expresses only the hypothesis of the author. In particular this may be true as to interpretations offered to explain surnames and place names. When a contemporary poem in honor of King Harold Fairhair mentions him under a name that seems to mean "cap" or "helmet," in the specific sense attached to the superstition of being born with a helmet, the Icelanders did not understand the word, and they interpreted it as meaning "shock-head," which then purported to have been a surname of the King, afterwards replaced by Fairhair. Here we seem to be presented with a learned speculation. But when we see that this interpretation is bound up with a story which appears in popular tradition in many countries, that King Harold had promised not to cut or comb his hair until he had won all Norway, then we are no longer sure whether the learned interpretation preceded the tradition or conversely.

It is part of the saga art to confirm the story by quoting old verses, and we admit the proof to be a good one, but quite often the sagas overdo this method by quoting verses that cannot be genuine. We catch the forgery very easily in the cases where a saga makes a ghost or a mere child express itself in artful verses, but there is no doubt that many other verses of the sagas are forged by some saga-man. On the other hand, we can be in a position to assert the truth of the account of the saga by proving the verses to be genuine. Metrics, vocabulary, metaphors are important criteria in determining the authenticity of the verses quoted. A couple of verses composed by Egil Skallagrimsson against King Eirik Blood-Axe are shown to be genuine because they contain just the

magic number of characters that correspond with the language and the runic rules of the age. So this part of the saga has a true historical basis, while another part of it is bolstered up with spurious verses. Verses relating to the outlawry of Gange-Rolf who, according to the sagas, had to leave Norway and then became the founder of the duchy of Normandy, appear genuine, so corroborating the tradition, by virtue of some very archaic word employed and of the observance of the early custom to name people only by surname.

It is a commonplace to modern historians, just as it was a principle of Snorri Sturluson, that contemporary poems are to be preferred to later sagas as historical sources, but we are bound to admit that an intelligent and exhaustive interpretation of the poems would not have been possible to us without the commentary and the supplement of the sagas. It is a very rare case when the chief poet of Saint Olaf in his verses gives a complete enumeration of the battles of his hero and exact information about the length of his reign. For the most part the laudatory poems upon the kings occupy themselves with describing the din and the bloodshed of battles; but it is a very laborious task to extract from them real information about the parties to the struggle, the strength of the forces engaged, the place of the battle, to say nothing about the causes of the fight. In many cases we should simply be at a loss to comprehend what the matter was about, if we had not the sagas to furnish the explanation. For the combination and the order of the single verses we have largely to rely upon the sagas, though sometimes we may discover some minor mistakes in them. We

would not even be able to establish a correct chronological series of the kings, if it were not given to us by the researches of the saga-men.

As historians, we must be grateful to the saga-writers for one thing which sometimes irritates us a little from the viewpoint of literary taste. That is their interest in genealogy. Just as in reading the novels of Walter Scott we may be tempted to skip his painting of scenery, so in the Iceland sagas we may choose to jump the genealogical lists, but in truth they give us historical material of great value, often going far back of historical times. To be sure, in the earliest links of ancestry we can detect legendary tradition, as when Icelandic settlers boast of descending from more or less mythical heroes; the ambition and the art of constructing noble pedigrees existed even in those days. But such cases are exceptions; in general, the genealogies of the sagas are throughout trustworthy and furnish useful information of social and even political importance. This holds good not only as to Iceland, but in regard to the history of Norway as well. In showing us the connections of kindred and the intermarriages between the great families of Norway just before the beginning of national history, the family sagas of Iceland reveal to us one of the conditions preparatory to the union of the kingdom; and in telling us about the marriages of the kings and their relatives, the Kings' Sagas make us understand much of their policies.

Beside genealogy, the Icelandic sagas are particularly interested in law and lawsuits. In this field we cannot expect tradition to be as reliable as in the case of the pedigrees; here the dramatic demands of the

story enter to change the details to quite another extent than in the simple lists of ancestors, and we dare not assert that such influence is completely counterbalanced by the antiquarian interests of the saga-men. In fact, mistakes have been proved. However, when we compare the law practice of the sagas with that of the age of their writing, we must frankly acknowledge that the sagas picture to us definitely different and obviously older conditions and conceptions than those known to us from the thirteenth century. So we observe in the sagas a distinct tendency to get back of the environment of their authors. It would be a premature conclusion that they present a true description of law in the days they tell about; indeed, it is remarkable how little they contain of really heathen thinking and practice. Roughly, I should prefer to say that they are stamped by the law practice of the first Christian century, the eleventh century, the age of the earliest saga-telling. But even so they go back to an age which we could not know in any other way.

This point illustrates clearly the twofold tendencies of the saga: it purposes to be art, but it purposes to be history as well. Both tendencies foster the love of realistic detail. Such love may be a danger to the historical truth of the saga, by spurring the teller on to invention of lifelike details, but it is also an encouragement for keeping in memory true incidents of life. So the saga is always balancing between fiction and history, and you never can decide *a priori* to which side the balance may gravitate.

Certainly, it would be a gross exaggeration, not to say something worse, to set up the principle that you should not believe anything in the sagas unless it be

supported in some other way. It is a fairer dictum, phrased by another scholar, that "if there are no grounds for holding that a thing is unhistorical, there are grounds for holding that it is historical." But, obviously, historians may disagree widely upon the arguments which may be said to present "grounds for holding that a thing is unhistorical." Individuals and ages may be more or less skeptical, and perhaps there will always be left a broad field of fairly conflicting judgments. Yet, after the purgatory of critical examination, the sum of facts retained by the sagas is still so large that they alone permit us to write the history of centuries.

FICTION SAGAS

THE distance between history and fiction is a very short one. Often it is precisely the greatest historical works which approach most closely to fiction. When you read the works of William H. Prescott, John Lothrop Motley, or Francis Parkman, you are not always able to state where history ends and creative imagination begins its work. Any historian who really wants to make the past living to you, to "resurrect" it, as Michelet said, is forced to use his imaginative faculties, and the transition from research to creative art is almost imperceptible.

To former generations the distance was even shorter than it is to us, and there was a time when fiction and history were not separated at all. You see them mingled in a particular way in the old Norse sagas, and you may find sagas where you are absolutely unable to state whether the ancient sagamen regarded them as pure fiction or as truth. They had, however, the conception of what they sometimes called "lying sagas," and, though the frontier may be undefined, such sagas constituted a literary field of their own.

The expression is ascribed to King Sverri, the man who gave the decisive impulse to the writing of the historical sagas, and it evidently contains a sense of depreciation. But public opinion was soon obliged to learn that there might be some respectability in pure

fiction too, and, according to the sources, it was the grandson of Sverri, King Hákon Hákonsson, who initiated, or at least authorized, the introduction of such sagas into written literature.

The new conception of this kind of literature was a result of foreign influence. The chivalric romance of the twelfth century, so highly appreciated at all the princely courts of Western Europe, embracing as it were all the morals and manners of the noble life of the aristocracy, could not leave the court of Norway unaffected. From the Anglo-Norman kingdom, the epic cycle of King Arthur and his men, together with other Welsh or Briton epics, were conquering Europe, fascinating everybody by their romantic adventures, and there is no doubt that the chief stock of them passed directly from Normandy and England to Norway. There they were translated from French into Norse.

We happen to have a statement about the date of the translation that seems to be the oldest one. This is the famous story of the illicit love of Tristan and Isolde. The copy preserved says that it was translated into Norse in the year 1226 by the order of King Hákon, and we can almost imagine the occasion of the work, the King having married the year before and, as a matter of duty, dismissed his former mistress. The translator names himself as Friar Robert; possibly he was an Englishman or a Norman. Certainly this is the same man as the Abbot Robert who some time later translated the love story of Elis and Rosamunda, this time also at the command of King Hákon.

With these two works the chivalric romance was introduced into Norway, and they were followed by

a series of other translations, whole long sagas as well as short love stories taken from Breton lays. Several of them purport to have been made at the order of the same King Hákon; but I prefer to think that this is merely fictitious, just a way of recommending themselves to a larger public. Some of these stories have a moralizing tendency, others are rather frivolous, but in all of them irresistible love and chivalrous bravery are the chief subjects. The heroes have to pass through infinite sufferings and fights in order to win the loved one, and the exploits in combat are often so copiously described that you realize that, to the audience of those days, they had an interest quite their own. Very naturally, then, the love romances carry with them the pure heroic tales, the epic cycles about Charlemagne, Roland, Ogier the Dane, Theoderic the Great, etc.

Almost the whole of this translation literature belongs to Norway; the Icelandic translations are both fewer and later, but no doubt the initiative of Norway gave a strong impulse to the Icelanders, and they began a more independent literary activity, creating a stock of pure fiction sagas.

Here again, the antiquarian interests so prominent in Iceland were united with the love of exciting stories; and old traditions from fairyland, or from times lying beyond all history, were put into writing. The style is identical with that of the family sagas, the construction of the stories follows the same lines; there is drama, there is the elaboration of the connected history of a couple of generations, and everything is told with an undisturbed serenity, as though it were real history.

In such a form we have the tragical saga of the

Volsungs and Niblungs,* partly told by Snorri Sturluson in his Edda. There you find the typical motives of love and revenge, the drama of inevitable conflict between bosom friends, the power of unavoidable fate ruling through generations. It is the parallel, you are tempted to think the prototype, of the Laxdalers' Saga, and Ibsen was justified in combining the two sagas in his drama *The Vikings at Helgeland*. But the Volsung Saga has nothing historical in it. It is partly built up from Old Norse poems, and its traditions go back to the great migrations of the fifth century, mingling fights and myths of German tribes.

Certainly, the saga-men had a stronger feeling of standing on historical ground when they told the dramatic story of Rolf Kraki (Big Stick), his family and his henchmen, and in this case tradition had a real basis in the existence of Danish kings of the names used, at the beginning of the sixth century. The Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus wrote it down as true history in the very first years of the thirteenth century, from the narratives of Icelanders. But with the exception of the names the historical matter of the tradition was almost nil. It is a story of retributive nemesis overtaking even the following generation. The father of Rolf is a wild viking, an abductor of women; the son is the fruit of his marrying, without knowing it, his own daughter, and although this son, King Rolf, is the most glorious and irreproachable hero of the Northern world, he has to fall a victim to the treachery of his own sister, born to his father by an elf-woman. Like Charlemagne of the romance, Rolf is accompanied by twelve

* For English translations, see Bibliography.

peers, and their history is interwoven with genuine fairy tales, for instance, the well-known stepmother tale. We are in a position to follow the growth of the saga through several stages, and we observe how it attracts more and more fiction motives. It gives us the whole tendency of saga developments during the thirteenth century.

From the tales about Rolf Kraki it is a short step to that cycle of sagas which has been appropriately called viking sagas. At the head stands the story of the famous viking chief, Ragnar Lodbrok (Shaggy-Breeks), the son of a Danish king, and of his still more famous sons. In the story of the sons some few historical traits may be found, for example, the mentioning of the conquest of Luna in northern Italy. From other sources we hear that in conquering Luna the vikings thought they had taken Rome itself. The saga tells a humorous tale of why Ragnar's sons did not pursue their expedition as far as Rome. They asked an old wayfaring man how far it was, and he answered: "You may judge for yourselves. You see the iron shoes I have on my feet, they are already old, and you see that other pair which I carry on my back, they are badly worn. It was that pair which I put on when I left Rome, and then they were quite new, so long have I been on the journey." Naturally, the vikings did not think it worth while to go so far out of their way, and Rome was saved.

The story of Ragnar himself does not tell much about viking exploits. Its purport is rather to make him the hero of some common fairy tales. He wins his first queen by killing the poisonous giant serpent which has encircled her house, and there he wins his surname too, as he protects himself against the poison

by his shaggy breeches. The feat recalls somehow the brave exploit of the hero of the Volsung Saga, Sigurd Fafnisbani, who rode to his bride through the fires surrounding her dwelling, and later Ragnar wins as his second queen the very daughter born to Sigurd from this meeting. But again the marriage is preceded by a fairy tale, the noble princess being found in the shape of a poor peasant maid, distinguished, however, by her beauty and her wit. The only event that seems to have been attached to Ragnar by old tradition is his gruesome death in the snake pit of an English king. There was a poem, composed in his name, showing his bravery in the moment of dying, concluding with the words of ideal heroism: "Laughing I shall die."

The Saga of Ragnar was adorned by a number of verses, evidently fabricated by the author, and it became the custom of the viking sagas to give them a semblance of historicity by inserting verses in the old style. So it is in the saga of the sea-king Half and his men. Here, again, the name of the king is very likely historical, some of the settlers in Iceland even claiming to be his descendants, but the whole saga is composed of legends and fairy tales, and evidently aims at creating a Norwegian parallel to Rolf Kraki of Denmark.

Certainly, people loved to hear this kind of stories, and according to a general law of economic and intellectual life, the demand had to be satisfied. The public had to be provided with the literary food that it wanted. So it is today, so it was in old Iceland. And why should not the saga-men meet the demand? They had at their disposal a well developed artistic form, they had a rich treasure of well tested

emotional effects, they had a vivid imagination, and they might cast around in the whole wide world for exciting and novel motives. So they were well equipped for the task, and they seized the opportunity. ✓

The great output of fiction sagas begins in the second half of the thirteenth century. We know very well that some of the fictitious viking sagas were told already in the twelfth century. We meet the names of the leading heroes—the Volsungs and Niblungs, Ragnar Shaggy-Breeks, Rolf Kraki, and others—in the poetical enumeration composed in the Orkney Islands at the middle of the twelfth century, simply praising them all as mighty warriors. Stories about the Danish heroes—from Rolf Kraki down to Ragnar Shaggy-Breeks—we meet again about the year 1200 in the work of Saxo Grammaticus, where so much Icelandic, and in part Norwegian, tradition has been adopted, and just therefore we are able to state that most of these sagas make use of some historical name to hang their stories on. But soon the imagination of the tellers made itself free from every historical restriction, and they merely revelled in the most fanciful inventions.

Thus the saga of the amazon queen, Hervor, and her descendants begins in some indefinite past in the land of giants and trolls, and the motive power of the story is a sword, made by a dwarf and laden with the curse that it cannot be drawn without killing a man. The saga introduces a really original and interesting feature by including and making a drama out of a series of versified riddles; other verses too imitate cleverly old Eddic poetry, and several of the

episodes are well invented and told. But how anybody could find history in it I am at a loss to understand.

The typical viking saga is that of Arrow-Odd. There is a slight possibility that a man of this name lived once upon a time, and some tradition about him was current before his saga was composed. But the author has striven to gather about him all the adventures he could reasonably—or unreasonably—imagine. The hero got his surname from his charmed arrows which always returned to him after shooting; as a matter of fact, however, the saga makes no very extensive use of this feature. He is simply represented as the invincible fighter in general. He begins his career with an expedition to the fairyland near the White Sea, where, in a battle with the native sorcerers, he does marvellous feats with a big wooden club, his foes falling like straw on both sides of him, and after that he manages to rescue himself and his men from the pursuit of witches and giants in Finnmark; some traits of his adventures among the giants may recall the stories about Odysseus and the Cyclopes.

Now he sails out as a viking, always defeating superior forces, harrying east and west. In order to assure his resisting all trials, the author makes him accept from an Irish princess a charmed shirt which protects him against fire and cold and all kinds of weapons, even against hunger. Only in one case the shirt will not give him any protection, that is if he is fleeing; but in the career of Arrow-Odd such a case is unthinkable. He carries his expeditions on to France, Brittany, and Guienne, and here he receives

Christian baptism; but this does not effect any change in his habits, except that it takes him as far as to Palestine.

In some unnamed country he chances to be carried off by a giant vulture and placed, as food for the vulture's young, high up in a mountainous gulch where no human being can get up or out. Nevertheless, by the assistance of a giant, he manages to kill the vultures and get away, and the giant takes him with him to give him as a plaything to his daughter; it is the story of Gulliver in Brobdingnag. Very comical is the tale of how the gallant warrior is laid in a cradle and the giant's daughter sings lullabies to him. But, of course, Arrow-Odd is master of the situation, he becomes the lover of the girl, and he teaches the giant the art of sailing, but then sails away himself.

Naturally, his life as a warrior errant continues, taking him as far as to America and Russia; he contrives to kill horrible dragons and defeats even evil demons. Disguised as a poor salt-maker, he takes service with a king of Greece, and here the fairy tale of the male Cinderella is attached to him; he proves superior to all the king's men in every kind of exercise, even in drinking, and, as the reward of an expedition to a land of trolls in Asia, he gets the king's daughter as his wife, inheriting the kingdom of Greece. As an old man, he returns to Norway to see again his childhood home, and there he meets with his death, as a witch had once predicted.

The Saga of Arrow-Odd has exploited, as it were, all the possibilities of the viking saga, heaping up all kinds of adventures, making a large use of fairy-tale themes. It is entertaining reading; but even an ad-

mirer of this literature has to admit that "it is somewhat overdone." We find rather ludicrous the way in which the hero is sent about to all known parts of the world and several unknown parts too. But this was a source of particular enjoyment to the Icelanders. From the second half of the thirteenth century they ceased more and more to go abroad, their communication with foreign nations was taken over by foreigners, and they themselves remained solitary in their far-off island. Then their fancy went abroad instead, and they had an insatiable desire to hear about adventures in foreign countries.

Many other sagas are essentially of the same type. In them all, that which is important is the story itself; the characters are delineated in very general contours, and there is no attempt at real psychology. Sometimes, even in this respect, we may observe an imitation of the family sagas. Thus the Saga of Ragnar Shaggy-Breeks describes how his sons receive the news of their father's death. One of them was busy trimming his spear, and, as the report concluded, he clutched his hands so hard around the spear that the mark was visible; at the end, he shook it so that it flew apart. Two of the other sons were playing at draughts; one of them, keeping in his hand a piece he had captured, pressed it so that blood gushed from under every nail; the other had fallen to cutting his nails, and he did not feel that the knife was cutting into the bone. The fourth son sat quietly in his seat and asked coolly about all the details, but his body swelled, and his color shifted from red to purple and then to white. When the English king who had caused Ragnar to be killed was told about their behavior, he easily understood that this last

of the sons was the most dangerous enemy. Yet the whole description, with all its variations, gives no truly individual psychology; it is just a grouping of outward features of a quite general character. Indeed, the fiction sagas very rarely attain even such a goal; they content themselves with telling the bare events and adventures.

Obviously, this means a vulgarization of the saga; its only object has become the entertainment of the moment. Perhaps you would say the same thing about another aspect of the same group of sagas, the element of comedy that is introduced. Indeed, the fiction sagas have almost inevitably a happy issue, ending every fight with the victory of the hero and rounding off the tale with weddings and children. Comic scenes fit naturally in with the cheerful temper of such stories, and we have to admit that the incorporation of humor is really an enlargement of the field of literature.

When the family saga was dominant, it was unthinkable to open a story with an introduction like this: "Now we begin a merry tale about a king named Gaut." The introductory chapter is in fact very amusing. It tells about a king hunting in the woods, throwing off in his zeal all his overclothes. Losing his bearings, he finds his way to a small cottage, led by a dog's barking. There a serf is standing outside, and he immediately kills the dog with his axe, saying: "You shall never again lead guests to our house, for I see that this man is so big that he will eat up everything if he gets in." The king forces an entrance into the cottage; and there he sees four men and four women, who call the serf names because he has allowed the guest to enter. They do not greet the

king, and, after a while, they begin eating without offering him a bite. He sits down at the table uninvited and eats heartily. The master of the house, seeing this, stops eating and pulls his hat down before his eyes in order not to see the calamity. Not a word is spoken. After having eaten, the king goes to sleep like the others, and then one of the women comes to talk with him. She tells him about the household, her father and mother, her three brothers, two of them married, all being characterized by comical names, and she tells how the old members of the family are accustomed to hurl themselves off a high rock, that they may not become a burden to the younger ones.

The next morning the king leaves; but, because he is barefoot, he asks the master of the house to give him a pair of shoes, and the man hands them to him without a word, having, however, first taken out the strings. When he is gone, the father distributes his property among the children, stating that it is so much diminished by the visit of the king that it cannot support the whole family. Therefore he goes with his wife and the serf to the traditional rock, where they all jump off, going gladly to the gods, and his last precept to the children is that they ought not to multiply the family—the oldest precept that I know about recommending birth restriction.

Some time later the daughter who had talked with the king bore a child, and there was great sorrow, the unmarried brother being persuaded with difficulty not to commit suicide. But when one day another brother saw his golden plates spoiled by two black snails creeping across them, leaving almost invisible tracks, he could stand it no longer, and he and

his wife threw themselves off the rock. The third brother was heartbroken when one day he observed a sparrow picking a kernel of grain in his field, and took his wife out of the world with him in the same way. Now only the two unmarried heirs were left, together with the sister's child, and when this boy had the misfortune to kill an ox with his spear, it was all over for the last brother; such a loss was irreparable, and he leaped from the family rock. The sister now took her boy away to the king, and this boy became the hero of the saga.

The fun of the story is not done with this; there are other episodes of a comic tenor. I think you will agree that this caricature of niggardliness has true literary merit, and it has even contributed to the amusement of these latter days, inasmuch as there are modern historians who have taken the story of the family rock seriously as a reminiscence of old customs. I should not say that all the comic episodes in the fiction sagas are as cleverly done as in this case; but they certainly constitute one of the most spirited elements in them.

Besides fighting exploits, the saga is interested in love, and there is one of the viking sagas that is almost exclusively a love story. This is the Saga of Fridthjof the Bold and Ingibjorg the Fair.* It is a somewhat discouraging confession to make that for a long time this story was regarded as a piece of history; its fanciful construction of political conditions in Norway before the unification of the kingdom was taken as an authoritative picture, and its description of a heathen cult in ancient times was

* Translated into English in *Three Northern Love Stories*, London, 1875.

used as a source for the history of religion. No wonder, then, that the German Kaiser caused a statue of Fridthjof to be erected at his alleged home on the Sognefjord. As a matter of fact, there is no word of historical truth in the whole saga; even the name of the hero is fabricated by the author, no such name ever having existed.

If, however, you read the story as an imaginative novel, you can admire its purity of style and construction and even of sentiment. The characters are simple, but well maintained, and they are effectively contrasted. The three main persons in the saga are all models of virtue, but the author has succeeded in making three different types out of them—the young hero Fridthjof, generous, but youthfully vehement—the old king, just as generous, but always deliberate—his young queen, Ingibjorg, the woman who loves, but obeys the call of destiny and duty. The author may have planned to create an imaginative parallel to the saga of Gunnlaug and Helga the Fair, and, according to the taste of his audience, he has felt obliged to give the story a happy issue, adding suitable portions of sentimentality, of witchcraft, and of heroic deeds. But the moral idealism pervading this story compares favorably with the best of foreign chivalric romance, and no doubt this is one of the sources of its inspiration.

Fridthjof's Saga, which in its turn has inspired idealistic modern poetry, stands, however, rather isolated in the old saga production. In other fiction sagas love has not such a pure character. Generally, it simply furnishes the pretext for sending the hero out on new adventures, and sometimes it is degraded into gross indecency, only slightly relieved by humor-

ous treatment. Here again we have to observe a manifest vulgarization of the saga.

But it is worth while to notice that the taste for happy love crept into the family sagas as well. In one of them, the saga about Gudmund the Mighty, there has been inserted at a later stage of saga development a little story about the marriage of his daughter Thordis, which was consummated against the wish of her father. When he observed the love growing up between the two young people, he made the lover, a man of the name Sorli, move away from the farm. But Sorli kept up his visits in spite of the father. Then the saga relates this incident: One day when Thordis went out of doors, it was fair weather with sunshine and south wind. Then she noticed a tall man riding towards the farm, and when she recognized him, she broke out: "How fine now is the sunshine and the south wind, as Sorli rides along!" Such was the coincidence, the saga remarks, almost by way of excuse—and indeed a burst of sentiment of this kind would scarcely have been permissible in earlier saga-telling. It is the lyricism of a later age rising. On the other hand, we see vulgarity and indecency, too, invading the historical sagas as in the stories about King Harold Hardrádi in Byzantium.

With instances like these, I touch on one of the most important features of the whole fiction literature of Iceland: its influence upon the historical sagas. The older poetic tradition has also left perceptible traces in the shaping of such sagas. Very likely the conflict of the Laxdalers' Saga has been sharpened by coming in touch with the tragic consistency of the Volsung tradition. An analogy has been justly observed between the Volsung Saga and the

history of the catastrophe that overtook King Olaf Tryggvason. According to his saga, the Swedish queen Sigrid Storráði, i. e., Sigrid of the Great Designs, came to hate him because he did not accept her in marriage. Afterwards she married the king of Denmark and devoted her genius for plotting to establishing the great alliance that defeated the hero king. When attention was first called to the parallel of this queen and the heroine of the Volsung Saga, who also instigated her husband to slay the man she had loved, it was suggested that the tragedy of the myth had received something of its features and character from the historical events. But later researches have made it clear that the history of Sigrid Storráði has a very meager foundation in fact, and so it has become evident, what we might infer from other reasons as well, that it is the Volsung tradition which has helped to build up the story of Queen Sigrid and King Olaf. We easily perceive how this has come about. As a great Belgian student of the relations between history and legend has remarked, a great defeat always demands an explanation, and the imagination of the people, set to work on such an explanation, does not seek for political reasons, but strives to personify the forces in action. Here, then, the motives of legendary tradition step in and begin shaping history.

The stock of legendary themes known to the sagatellers was largely increased by the broad current of fairy tales from abroad which swept over the Scandinavian North, particularly from the beginning of the thirteenth century. We have direct information about the importation of such tales from the first half of the fourteenth century. It is told of a Nor-

wegian clergyman, Jon Halldorsson, who became bishop in Iceland in the year 1322, that at a very early age, surely then before the close of the thirteenth century, he went abroad to study as a Dominican friar, first to Paris, later to Bologna, and he returned as the most learned clergyman who ever came to Norway. His Icelandic biographer exclaims admiringly: "Who can sufficiently explain how willing he was to delight people present with the extraordinary examples he had learnt abroad from books as well as from life!" And it is added that some people in Iceland wrote down his stories for the enjoyment of themselves and of others. "Examples" (*exempla*) is exactly the usual medieval designation of fables or fairy tales told with a moral purpose, and both the biography and other manuscripts have preserved not a few of the tales brought to Iceland by Bishop Jon, so that we can state that they belong to the great stock of similar "examples" common at that time to all Europe. Many of them had their origin in eastern countries, even so far away as India; but everywhere they made themselves at home and were naturalized.

Many such fairy tales appear in the fiction sagas already mentioned. In part, we may trace them directly to the translations of foreign literature. There is an Icelandic saga which, in its chief outlines, reproduces the story of Tristan; and the werewolf theme, introduced by one of the Breton lays which were translated in Norway, was made the basis of no less than three romantic sagas of Iceland. Sometimes this theme has combined in popular tradition with the tale of the wicked stepmother or with that of Amor and Psyche, and in such forms it

is still a favorite tale with the people of Norway.

In later family sagas, too, we may find traces of this foreign importation. So, in the Saga of Grettir the Strong, several episodes seem to bear the mark of foreign influence, and in particular the closing chapters are made up of elements borrowed from foreign stories. They tell about Grettir's brother, Thorstein, who went to Constantinople to find and kill the slayer of Grettir. There he was involved in an intrigue with a wealthy and noble lady named Spes, and the story about the vain attempt of her husband, three times repeated, to catch the Icelandic lover *flagrante delicto* recalls strongly some of the stories of Boccaccio. Here is no sympathy with the deceived husband, he must always beg the pardon of his wife for his unfounded suspicion, and at last he is punished for his untrue charges. The lady manages to swear herself free by an elaborate trick. She went to church to offer her oath for her innocence. On the way she had to pass a pool, and here an old beggar walking on crutches offered his help to carry her over, but fell with her on the other side. She pretended to be very angry and, arriving at the church, she took the oath that no man but her husband had come near her except that awkward beggar. Upon this oath she was acquitted, and the husband was sent into exile. Of course, the beggar was her lover Thorstein, and now they were married. The same episode is told in the Saga of Tristan; but it is not necessary to presume that the author of Grettir's Saga has borrowed it from there. Indeed, the same tale appears in an old Byzantine love story, and we may content ourselves with concluding that, in any case, the idea of

the trick has been transferred to the Icelandic saga from some foreign romance.

Even in the historical sagas of the Norwegian kings, themes of such foreign origin were introduced. There is a story connected with the childhood of King Harold Fairhair, about thefts from the treasury of his father, and this story you may trace back as far as to the tale told by Herodotus about the Egyptian king Rhampsinit. In the saga the episode has been combined with a widespread fairy tale about a young hero who is fostered by a giant; you already know this tale from the Saga of Arrow-Odd, and it appears in later fiction sagas too. In the Saga of Harold Fairhair, the first elements of this story have been fixed as early as about the year 1200, and then, in later forms of the saga, it is constantly expanded until, finally, it develops into two parallel stories. It is fiction conquering history.

Such intrusion is, however, not always detrimental to the historical saga. The interest in love that asserts itself in fiction sagas may in certain cases adorn historical sagas with charming episodes. In the Saga of King Eystein, the brother of Sigurd the Crusader, we hear about an Icelandic poet, Ivar Ingimundsson, who came and stayed at the King's court. He looked very sad, and the King asked him for the reason, but Ivar refused to tell. "I cannot speak about it," he said. The King then began to guess, but three times his guess proved wrong. "Now it becomes difficult," the King said. "Is there then some woman in your country whom you think about?" "So it is, lord," said the poet. The King offered to propose for her hand in his behalf, but Ivar

said that was impossible. The King said he might find a solution even though the woman were married, but Ivar disclosed the fact that she was the wife of his own brother. Now the King made three different and very generous proposals in order to comfort the distressed poet, but Ivar found no relief in any of them. "The matter now becomes very difficult," said the King, "and I have only left a proposal that may seem of no value in comparison with all the former ones, but perhaps it may be useful. Please come to me every day at the time when I am not sitting busy with affairs, and then we will talk about the lady as long as you want; sometimes the sorrow of man lightens if he may talk about it." So it was done, and, indeed, little by little Ivar grew glad again and won back his former sprightliness.

I cannot refrain from remarking that, just as in this case, love stories of the sagas quite often have poets as their heroes. I recall the saga of Gunnlaug and Helga the Fair; besides, there is the saga of the poet Thormod who got his surname Kolbrunarskald because of his love verses made to the girl Kolbrun, and from the end of the thirteenth century we have the saga of the poet Kormak, where the chief subject is his unhappy, but pure, love for a married lady; this saga is simply built up as a framework for his poetry. The saga of Fridthjof and Ingibjorg, too, represents its hero as a poet. Such circumstances suggest that, in the sagas, true interest in love originates in poetic minds, and in those fiction sagas where the spark of poetry is missing love is generally degraded. But it is important to note that a sense of poetry is advancing parallel with

the growth of fiction. We see imagination rising to power in the whole field of popular literature, and we see clearly that the future belongs to fiction and poetry. The old saga is doomed.

THE END OF THE SAGA

THE writing of genuine historical sagas had a short life in Iceland. The first saga of a Norwegian king can be dated at about 1160; the last was finished 120 years later. The earliest saga of an Icelandic bishop was written shortly after 1200; the last, shortly before 1350. And in both fields the old character of the saga appears profoundly changed.

Since Snorri Sturluson, about 1230, had finished his masterly work on the history of Norway, following closely upon the final composing of the sagas about King Sverri and his immediate successors, which gave the history down to about 1210, there was almost no further possibility of independent research in that whole field. You may wonder that nobody was anxious to study and write the ecclesiastical history of Norway, the life of archbishops and bishops, or the development of monasteries. Indeed, there was written in Norway a short chronicle about the foundation of a single monastery there, and some more such works may have existed, but the one that is left is written in Latin and so gives an indication that members of the Norwegian clergy had no active interest in national literature. In the view of the Icelanders, the king loomed as the predominating figure, uniting in himself the whole history of the nation.

Therefore the kings' sagas alone could be con-

tinued, and in fact they were continued. There was even a literary connection between the old and the new saga works. The man who took up the legacy of Snorri was his nephew, his friend and pupil, Sturla Thordarson. He was early imbued with the enthusiasm of historical research, and amidst family strife he enjoyed the study of the ancient history of his own country. He was a man of almost fifty years when, in the year 1262, he went for the first time to Norway. He was in disfavor with the King on account of his opposition to the royal policies aiming at the appropriation of Iceland, but he succeeded in winning the favor of the young Queen, the consort of young King Magnus who was at the head of the government while his father, old King Hákon, was away on a military expedition to Scotland. Before the young Queen Sturla told a saga, a story about a witch, which she highly enjoyed, and he was allowed to recite before the King laudatory poems in the old style upon the King himself and his father. The young ruler became so enthusiastic over the performance that he exclaimed: "I think you are a better poet than the pope himself!" Sturla was accepted among the intimate friends of the King, and when the news came that old King Hákon had died out in the Orkneys, shortly before Christmas, 1263, King Magnus charged Sturla with writing his saga.

This was a work that had to start from the very beginning of the thirteenth century, and so it covered the whole period from the point where the earlier sagas left off. For his material Sturla might to some extent have recourse to oral tradition; but on the whole such tradition could not give him much more than scattered anecdotes. The bulk of his work

was built up from documents, notices and reports in the royal chancery, and so its foundation was quite different from that of older sagas. Yet he strove to maintain the old saga style, even going the length of referring to his own laudatory poem as evidence, so concealing his true sources. It must be admitted, too, that he displayed a great adroitness in rendering his information in the shape of story-telling, and at the same time he was very careful about stating the correct facts. You cannot help seeing, however, that the true saga spirit is no longer present here; in spite of occasional flashes of drama, there is something spurious in the work, and, moreover, you find nothing there of the broad historical mind of Snorri; the nephew has all the characteristics of an epigonus, an honest and industrious imitator.

Such as he is, we have to be grateful for his fidelity to literary tradition, and certainly he felt it a duty to keep it up. He went to Norway once more, in the year 1277, and now he was charged by King Magnus with the task of writing the King's own saga. He accepted the commission, and he wrote his new work from information obtained from the King himself and from his chancery; but unfortunately only some few fragments have been preserved. When, some years later, in 1284, Sturla died, nobody was left to continue the work. No later king of Norway had his saga written.

The interest in Norwegian history, however, was not extinct in Iceland. In clerical and official centers there were men who every year made entries in their notebooks about events in Norway; but nobody rose above such dry annalistic notices.

Whereas earlier we find full-limbed and florid sagas, from that time on we have to be content with skeletons.

Sturla Thordarson took up the task of writing the history of contemporary Iceland too. He had already made a revised edition of the *Landnámabók*, and before his times several people had written books and given records of Icelandic history, in particular from the ecclesiastical point of view, down to the close of the twelfth century. Sturla wrote what he called the *Icelanders' Saga*, from the beginning of the thirteenth century to the death of Snorri (1241), a work centering in the struggles within his own family, the Sturlungs. Again he labored to imitate the saga style, and to a certain extent he succeeded, but the construction of the work was not saga-like at all. You find a painstaking endeavor to tell the truth; in this respect you cannot commend Sturla strongly enough, and it is all the more admirable as he tells about conflicts where his nearest relatives and friends, even he himself, had taken sides. But he crowds his narrative with details and names to such a degree that he squeezes the life out of it; he makes no distinction between what is important and unimportant, and he has not the slightest idea of making the saga a drama. Other men continued his work in the same style down to about 1264, when Iceland lost its independence. But that was the end.

The purely ecclesiastical sagas, the sagas about the Icelandic bishops, had never been continued in a regular way. After the composing of the earliest bishops' sagas, in the course of some few years at the beginning of the thirteenth century, the work

simply stopped for almost a hundred years; it looks as if purely ecclesiastical interests had no great place in the minds of the Icelanders.

At the close of the twelfth century there was a clergyman in northern Iceland by the name of Gudmund Arason who strove to lead a kind of revival movement. He demanded complete submission to the commands of God, and his adherents said that he worked miracles. He was made a bishop in the year 1202, and the chieftain who had him exalted to this high position thought to find an obedient servant in him. But Gudmund was filled with the most uncompromising ecclesiastical spirit, and he took up the fight for the supremacy of the spiritual power. He fought his foes by excommunication and by secular arms, and one of his followers wrote a saga about his earlier life to impress his enemies with his holiness; that was just in the days when the bishops' sagas of southern Iceland were written. But the enemies gained the upper hand; Gudmund was even disavowed by the archbishop of Nidaros, he had to leave his bishop's see, and he wandered about the country, accompanied by beggars and poor people, in their eyes a saint, but in the eyes of the world a fool. He died in the year 1237; but if a saga of his life as a bishop was written at that time, it has not been preserved to posterity.

Iceland had to go through great religious changes before such a man could be appreciated, and then there would be no more opportunity for the saga. Indeed, his work meant the separation of the Church from her former social and political connections and from the national traditions of the

country. Immediately after his death, Norwegians, not Icelanders, were appointed to both bishops' sees of the island, and soon began the organized struggle for carrying the canonical principles, the independence of the Church, to victory in Iceland. The leading man in this new fight, supported by the full power of the Norwegian Church, was the incumbent of the southern bishop's see, Arni Thorlaks-son, who, though more than once defeated and seeing his preliminary gains reversed, after three decades of struggles, finally, at the very end of the thirteenth century, succeeded in having the Church of Iceland freed from secular serfdom. When then, after the beginning of the fourteenth century, his saga was written, very naturally it retained nothing of the true saga spirit; it was a learned ecclesiastical work in latinizing language, modelled after similar books from the European continent. So were the two bishops' sagas which in the 1340s were written in northern Iceland; one of them, the life of Gudmund Arason, who now was presented as a candidate for canonization, was even originally composed in Latin. One can hardly use the word saga about such works; they did not wish to keep up the line of the old saga literature, and in truth they were its death knell.

The production of family sagas had continued through the whole thirteenth century; but those composed towards the close of the century deviate markedly from the old type. They are founded on a basis of true tradition, but the whole historical setting and the combination of events are inventions of the authors. When they try to trace the origin of their heroes back to the Norwegian fatherland,

they are almost as completely outside true history as the pure fiction saga of *Fridthjof*. They are filled with witchcraft stories, with fights against ghosts and ogres, and other such mythical heroic exploits. Just as *Arrow-Odd* is the typical hero of the fiction sagas, so is *Gretti the Strong* the hero of the later family sagas who attracts to himself all stories of this kind, and his saga is a very storehouse of such fairy-tale achievements.* At the same time, the artistic elements inherited from older sagas are employed in a perfunctory, mechanical way; so the conception of *Destiny* appears rather crude, *Fate* having become a purely exterior power, unconnected with mental life.

On the other hand, even the latest family sagas retain a psychological interest and the ambition of picturing characters. Through the whole mass of incredible stories, where the physical strength of *Gretti* is the essential element, you feel the deep tragedy of his life. Fighting his way as an outlaw during almost twenty years, he becomes a lonely man, not only in the physical sense, but in the depths of his soul. The saga really manages to make you feel his longing for men, his mental suffering from isolation, and you see the strength-sapping effect upon his mind from the most harassing of all his worries, the intolerable fear of darkness that besets him.

It is a remarkable, almost surprising fact that the power of constructing a great psychological drama reaches a culminating point in one of the last family sagas, the *Story of Burnt Njál*.† The saga is writ-

* *Gretti's Saga* is translated into English. See Bibliography.

† Translated into English by George W. Dasent.

ten towards the close of the thirteenth century, and it is founded upon two or three separate stories from oral tradition, perhaps already in written form. Here there is an individual author, and he uses his material rather independently. His narrative is marred by a profuse and meaningless repetition of predictions, and his interest in lawsuits has lured him into inserting interminable formulas of legal procedure, unfortunately mostly copied from contemporary laws instead of the laws belonging to the period he tells about, three hundred years earlier.

But, such flaws aside, the narrative has a brilliance and an animation that captivates the reader. He tells his story in leisurely fashion with copious details, but his sentences are firm and strong, communicating clear and living images, and he is a master in the art of wording exchange of pointed speeches, whether pathetic or sarcastic. In spite of a too long-drawn-out preparation, he sets before you a drama of the highest excitement, almost precipitating you from one catastrophe into the other. But his greatest art is in his character portraits.

Unforgettable is the old Njál, so considerate, so prudent in all his behavior. If he is always for peace and never fights, you clearly feel that it is a slander to call him a coward; his heart is strong and courageous, longing for truth and justice, and his love for family and friends, even for enemies, has something exalted about it. Quite different is his son Skarphedin, but just as unforgettable in his passionate fighting will. His pale face under the dark hair has a gloomy look; his smile forebodes danger, and his tongue is as trenchant as his axe. He hates to

ask for help from anybody, and you will almost think him a maniac, when, in the face of imminent danger, you hear him affronting the men who might support his case. But he is upright in his wildness, and fearlessly he meets his terrible death in the fire of his home.

Many other characters are pictured in the story of *Njál*, more than in any other saga, and many of them are individualized so that they stand forth in memory with clear-cut traits. It seems quite fitting that, in the moment when we see the literature of the family sagas nearing its end, it produces a work that matches the best of the early tales, the *Saga of Egil Skallagrimsson*. With the *Story of Burnt Njál*, this literature goes down in a splendid sunset.

But it is the end. And the very saga of *Njál* carries the mark of decline. It no longer has in it the old spirit of indomitable revenge, and it gives place to much more of sentiment than the sagas of the classical age. It contains sentimental scenes which, in their kind, are truly admirable; but, after all, sentimentality is not the character of true saga. You meet here with new moral ideals; the author does not only look backward to a period of strong men, fighting each other with irrepressible will; he has looked into the future as well, into a land of promise for better men, for the reign of the Christian spirit. In such a land the family saga has no home, and it fades away.

We cannot give any exact date; but after the close of the thirteenth century no family saga founded upon historical tradition was written. Even copies of the existing family sagas became rare; the *Saga of Njál* was almost the only one that was able to

retain some popularity. The dominant taste had taken a different direction. Poetry and fiction became the order of the day.

Fiction sagas were still produced, and in abundance. If you take these works into consideration, there is no end of the saga literature. But they gave almost nothing new. Whether they present their heroes under Icelandic or foreign names—indeed, magnificent foreign names, like Hektor, Adonius, Heremitas, etc., became most fashionable—they contain merely old themes in varied combinations. Love appears still more as a motive power than in older sagas; there are bewitched queens who try to seduce young princes—haughty princesses who are humiliated to abandon their pride for love—other princesses who must be rescued from the power of terrible giants—princes who go abroad in the wide world to find fair princesses they have dreamed about. Almost without exception, everything passes in the world of royal families, and the scenes of events are laid far away, in Paris or Constantinople, Asia or Africa. It is the fanciful world of an imagination that wants to move away from realities. The events occurring here are similarly fantastic. Nothing passes in a natural way; witchcraft is everywhere. The heroes have to fight with all kinds of giants and trolls, with spellbinding and delusions; but they are always victorious in the end, and after the most marvellous feats they win their beloved ones. In all this welter of supernatural and unnatural adventures you may find here and there some fine expressions of sentiment, and you may be amused at the wild exuberance of invention, but on the whole there is a deadly monotony of plots

and events; and very rarely is there an attempt at human psychology. It is pure pastime literature.

When these generations occupied themselves with the historical sagas produced by their ancestors, it was only in order to insert into them bits of fiction of the same kind as that filling contemporary literature. Such insertions were made in the family sagas, and they were made in the Norwegian kings' sagas too. Of course, their historical value is nil; but they attest strongly to the domination of the new literary taste prevailing in Iceland, adequately expressed by the fiction sagas.

In the affection of the Icelandic people, however, these sagas were outrivalled by versified renderings of the same themes. The old poetic art had had its last cultivators in Snorri Sturluson and Sturla Thor-darson; but they had not been able to endow it with more than an artificial, spurious life. New poetic forms were being introduced, and from the beginning of the fourteenth century we meet with a kind of poetry that completely replaced the old models. The modernity of these verse forms is attested by the fact that they have held their own down to our times. These are the "rhymes," so called with a name borrowed from abroad. They have the simple meters of real folk-song, cutting away all the complicated and intricate rules of ancient versification. The backbone of these verses, that which makes them verse and which imprints them in the memory and the liking of the people, is the rhyme in the modern sense of the word, and the general type is the stanza of four lines. The fundamental difference between the new and the old poetic form becomes apparent by observing that the new verses

are adapted for singing, while you could not think of the old poetry otherwise than as something recited. The melodious character of the language becomes more important and more impressive than the quantity of syllables, and real melodies come to support the rhymes. They begin even to be sung as accompaniment of dances, and so poetry is transformed from the property of a single man to that of the common people.

The contents of the rhymes were taken from the sagas—not from all kinds of sagas, however, but almost exclusively from the fiction sagas; the only notable exception is the saga of Grettir, and that is hardly to be called an exception. Generally, the rhymes follow the sagas rather exactly, so that quite a series of rhymes is needed to replace a single saga. The change from the saga to the rhyme is, then, simply in the form; but this change means the introduction of a new element, the lyric.

The lyrical sentiment now coming forward asserts itself by the addition of purely lyrical verses preceding the epic rhymes and striking the keynote to them. Almost invariably, such verses sing of love, usually unhappy love which, in all times, seems to have been more productive of poetry than the happy variety, and the frame of mind of Icelandic poetry is given by lines like these: "In all ages girls were much loved by men, and people of olden times could not avoid agonies of heart."

Evidently, there is a change of temper in this new art. We feel it everywhere in Icelandic literature. Religious poetry, too, frees itself from ancient rules and takes more intimate lyrical forms. Even in the sagas we perceive notes of such lyrical sentiment; it

is characteristic that the authors now become aware of the landscape. The Story of Burnt Njál leads the way by the outburst of Gunnar about the beauty of the hillside, the fields, and the meadows. In one of the later sagas, the purest love story of them all, you will find verses that combine sentiment with the landscape in absolute unity—where the black sea embodies sorrow, and sunset awakens longing for the beloved. In another saga, more of the fairy-tale kind, the nature of Iceland is incarnate in a giant who walks in snow and storm. The landscape has become something living.

This advance of lyricism was not an isolated Icelandic phenomenon. On the contrary, it was general in Europe and, in particular, had its parallel in Norway. Since the second half of the thirteenth century a true folk ballad developed in Norway. Here, too, the subjects were taken from the fiction sagas, whether translated or home-made. But the Norwegian ballads were not merely versified transcriptions of the prose sagas; they concentrated them into short, concise songs in a pregnant lyrical diction. While the Icelandic rhymes, on the whole, are rather dull, the Norwegian folk-songs have a poetic power that cannot fail to grip every reader. The exaggerated achievements of the saga heroes are transformed into true heroism. There may be tragedy, as in the song about Roland, or there may be humor, as in a song where the subject is borrowed from a fiction saga concerning King Harold Hardrádi. But always the spirit of true poetry is powerfully present. If the Norwegians had taken a very small part in the forming of sagas, they now used saga material in a way that gave it a new life.

Such, then, was the end of the sagas. Historical sagas were supplanted by fiction, and fiction sagas were transformed into a poetical literature, the rhymes of Iceland, the folk-songs of Norway.

If, now, we look for the causes of this development, we can see in the saga literature itself some fundamental tendencies which logically point in the direction followed. The saga sought to be a piece of art, and when the historical subjects preserved by oral tradition were exhausted, the art of telling had to take hold of invention, so in a constantly increasing degree imagination must be expected to dominate literary production.

But such a merely literary explanation does not account for the vulgarity of taste which we see invading Icelandic saga-writing. Neither does it account for the absolute discontinuance of writing historical sagas, whether about the kings of Norway or about the bishops of Iceland. It is true that in the course of the fourteenth century Norway ceased to have kings of its own; but as no king's saga was written after 1280, the gradual extinction of Norwegian political independence could not be the cause of the supplanting of sagas by naked annalistic notes.

Historians have generally agreed upon combining the decadence of the saga literature with an all-comprehensive decay of Icelandic civilization. Iceland lost its political independence from the 1260s, when it passed under the rule of the kings of Norway, and from the fourteenth century the country seems to be sinking into a corrosive poverty. There are no more great chieftains going abroad to vindicate the art and the honor of the nation; there

is no political, no economic, and no original intellectual activity; commercially the country becomes dependent on foreign powers; it disappears as an element of European life.

Fifty years ago an American geologist, a Harvard professor, J. D. Whitney, put forward the theory that the sudden decline of Iceland was the effect of a radical change in the climatic conditions of the country. He thought he could perceive that, in the Arctic regions as a whole, an increase of cold had been going on for many centuries, one of the consequences being the dying out of forests in Iceland; the people had had to face an ever harder fight against the elemental forces, and in that fight the people of this once so favored island had been forced to yield the high place they had at one time occupied in the ranks of intellectual nations. He thought the continuous deterioration of climate was the real reason why the Icelanders of our days, after battling against cold, famine, disease, and volcanic agencies for centuries, had begun to leave their native land for America.

In recent years the basic idea of this theory has been taken up again in a somewhat changed shape. The younger students of physical geography do not, I think, believe in a steady deterioration of climate; but some of them, at least, speak of climatic cycles with longer or shorter waves of wet and cold or dry and hot weather, and they think that a cold wave, lasting for some five centuries, caught Iceland and, in fact, adjacent Arctic countries, like Greenland and Norway, from the close of the thirteenth century, forcing the nations there down to a lower standard of life and of civilization. One of

the facts adduced in support of this contention is the dwindling of agriculture in Iceland from that date, contemporary with the increased importation of grain into Norway.

Personally, I am of the opinion that both the dying out of forests and the abandonment of agriculture in Iceland may be easily accounted for by other reasons. No doubt the rather scanty birch woods of the island could without any difficulty be laid waste by man in a few centuries, and as to agriculture, Iceland never was a very favored land. When the Hanseatic towns started sending their ships loaded with Baltic grains to Norway, it was a very natural thing that the Norwegian people eagerly received this good and cheap food as a welcome supplement to their bill-of-fare, and from Bergen it was transported to Iceland in such plenty that it became unnecessary, or in any case unprofitable, to keep on cultivating grain up there. So far as I can see, no real proof has been given of a colder climate reigning in Iceland or in Norway after the end of the thirteenth century. The chief argument rests upon the general political and intellectual decline, and that is better explained from social and political causes.

I have already indicated how the development of the Church of Iceland naturally led to the decay of the bishops' sagas. You have seen how in the course of the thirteenth century the clergy fought to free itself from secular dominion, and at the very close of the century succeeded in having the Church established as a truly independent power, engaged in ecclesiastical affairs only. But if it is true—and I think it is true—that Icelandic clergymen were effectively

cooperating in the general production of saga literature, then you easily see that the withdrawal of such an active body from the work of furthering national traditions must carry large consequences for the whole literary life of the nation. A chasm was cut between the people and the strongest intellectual class of the country, the people being left with only its own resources, when the clergy renounced the national leadership in literary work.

The political development of Iceland—if it may be permissible to speak of political development in a country which did not really possess a political organization—had results of a similar kind. The family conflicts that harrowed the commonwealth during the first century of its existence and gave their character to the “saga age,” were brought to an end by the consolidation of a highly exclusive aristocracy which took the power in the country in its hands from the beginning of the eleventh century. But in the course of less than two centuries this aristocracy, an alliance of the great families, degenerated into a virtual oligarchy, developing all the inherent vices of such a body, the interest in power for the sake of power merely and, as consequence, a bitter competition of individual ambitions and greeds, leading up to real civil wars mercilessly fought. These wars, in which the Sturla family was one of the parties and in which Snorri Sturluson was ignominiously murdered, could not be brought to an end till the king of Norway made himself master of the island, in the year 1262. The outcome meant much more than the simple loss of political independence. As a matter of fact, the old aristocracy of Iceland, once aspiring to intellectual leader-

ship in intimate alliance with the clergy, was reduced to some few families. On this side, too, the people was left alone with its literary demands.

Who, then, can wonder that vulgar taste came to dominate literary production? Development in the literary line was exactly concurrent with social changes.

It is rather a surprise to see that, once in a while, there would arise a reaction against the prevailing vulgarity. About the year 1400, a man by the name of Sigurd Thordarson, who was a professional fiction-teller, amused himself and his audiences by reciting a "rhyme" which proved to be the merriest travesty on the whole modern fiction literature. It is a strange coincidence—or perhaps it is not so strange?—that this piece of parody is written almost exactly at the same date as Chaucer included in his *Canterbury Tales* the merry story about Sir Thopas and his heroic fights, making fun of the same kind of literature. But the work of the Iclander is still more elaborate.

The hero of this rhyme was a beggar, tall and gross, not exactly a beauty, thin-bearded and wry-toothed, a man who distinguished himself above everybody else by his fabulous capacity for eating, by virtue of this quality regarding himself as one of the foremost men of the nation. His heroic equipment was his big stick—alluding to the Icelandic designation of beggars as "staff-men"—his provision bag, and his butter case. He had the exalting experience, unfortunately only a dream, to be called by the gods to Valhall in order to decide a dispute between gods and heroes about a marriage. He solved the dispute by the ingenious verdict that he

himself would marry the maid, and he was already putting out his dirty hand to accomplish the betrothal. But then arose a terrible battle among all those present, and in this fight gods and heroes achieved all the superhuman feats that made the thrilling moments of all the fiction sagas and rhymes. Marvellous blows were given, and corpses fell so heavily that the crash might be heard a hundred miles off; heroes died laughing after having their heads split, or they laid themselves down in heroic silence when their whole bodies were split from head to waist. The beggar was not inferior to the others; at the moment when one of the heroes slew eighteen giants, he hit one man on the head with such force that four teeth were broken loose. In spite of all his bravery he was at last thrown out of Valhall and, in a deplorable condition, he awoke among his fellows, only a beggar again.

The whole story is given in an extremely droll mixture of lofty and commonplace language, at every moment changing between the gross realities of the beggar's character and high-flown romantic magnificence. It recalls the laughter-moving travesties composed by Norwegian authors of the eighteenth century, Ludvig Holberg and J. H. Wessel, upon heroic poems and tragedies of their age. It must be said that the Icelandic parodist was not able to change the current literature of his country, but this contrast to the seriousness with which the production of vulgar fiction was continued, makes us discern more clearly the general decline of literary taste, the fall of literature to a plebeian level.

In Norway the social development was somewhat along parallel lines. There the clergy had never

taken such an active part in national literary production, being already from the twelfth century more closely engaged with purely ecclesiastical interests. From about the same time the old aristocracy began to separate from the people at large, taking a more distinctly feudal character; but this movement did not reach its goal so soon, the exclusiveness of the nobility becoming a social fact only from the fourteenth century, the separation from the people being then more evident by the increasing adoption of foreign elements.

Perhaps it was in part owing to this slowness of development that the folk ballad which supplanted the fiction saga in this country reached such a high level of artistic merit. It seems at least likely that we are justified in tracing some of these ballads to the homes of noblemen; from there they spread to the people. It attests forcibly to the poetical genius of the Norwegian people, however, that it was able to continue and develop so fine a style of poetry, and it is well worth notice that this literary production was forthcoming in the centuries which, otherwise, are characterized by the decline of political activity. The folk-song literature of that age is a superb compensation for the small contribution of Norway to saga literature.

The imperishable legacy of the sagas was given to the world by Icelandic writers within the space of not much more than a hundred years, and although this glorious harvest was followed by a long and barren winter, the people that produced a literature of such rare vitality is rightly entitled to the gratitude of all later generations.

THE END

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